

A PRAIRIE ROSE BERTHA E. BUSH



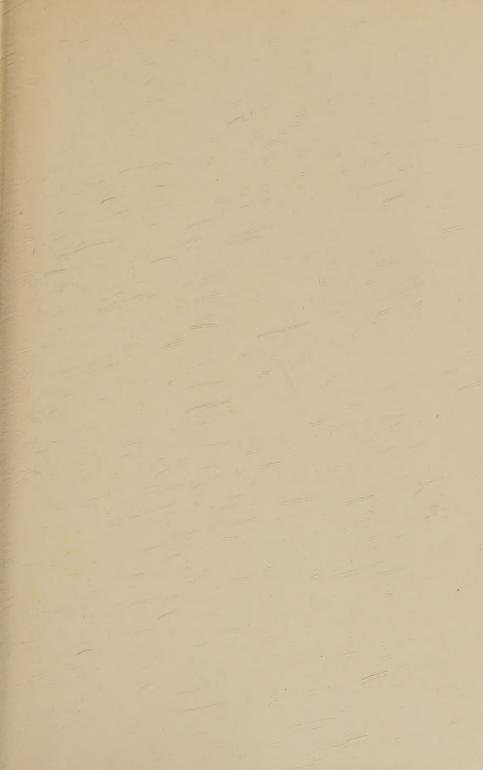




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A PRAIRIE ROSE







"It was the first of April, and the winter was breaking up." FRONTISPIECE. See page 186.

The Beacon Will Bookshelf

A Prairie Rose

By Bertha E. Bush

With Illustrations by Henry C. Pitz



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ILLUSTRATIONS

"It was the first of April, and the winter was		
breaking up" Frontispiece		
FACING PAGE		
It seemed very long to Rose before the afternoon		
wore away and darkness came		
Every day the two came out to look at their garden 70		
The man bent over the safe door 164		
One day the postman, on his forty-mile route,		
brought a letter for Rose		



A Prairie Rose

CHAPTER I

IN A PRAIRIE-SCHOONER

as the eye could see. Not a tree, not a fence, not a house, not even a hill to break the smooth, horizon line. Only green grass blowing in the wind, and sunlight and shadow chasing each other over a limitless, green sea.

"Oh, how clean it is!" cried Rose rapturously, as she thrust her curly head from the dimness of the mover's wagon into the morning sunshine. "It looks as if God had just made it."

"Do you like it, Susan B?" asked Robert, looking up from the camp-fire he was making with sticks prudently gathered up in the last woods they had passed through, and carried along for use in the stickless prairie.

"Like it? It's glorious," answered the girl, with a long, delicious sniff of the rose-laden air.

It was a perfect day. All along the way the wild roses were blooming, and the delicate pink of their blossoms was just the color of the girl's cheeks. The air was full of the liquid music of the meadow-lark's song.

"I've got a heap to do! I've got a heap to do!" mimicked Rose back to the meadow-lark, in pure gladness of heart.

It was a day when nothing but gladness seemed fitting. The prairie was beautiful, and fragrance and bird-song filled the air. What did it matter that they had been so long on the journey that Rose had declared the day before that she knew the very joints of the wagon ached? What did it matter that they had not the slightest idea of what the new home would be like? What did it matter that their store of provisions had reduced itself to coffee, flour, salt pork, and dried apples? Robert, bending over his fire, was whistling gayly. He had not whistled like that in their eastern home.

"And yet — and yet —" admitted Rose,

as she made her way under the canvas to the flour-box in the back of the wagon, "it is a little lonely."

It was lonely, and, in spite of Rob's whistling, it was very quiet. There was no sound but the meadow-larks and the wind. The jolting prairie-schooner moved softly over the faintly marked track in the prairie grass into which the road had dwindled. Except for their own little outfit, there was no sign of a human being's existence. Even the omnipresent tin can, which now strews every wilderness, was lacking. It was not yet the day of tin cans.

"I feel as if it were the garden of Eden, and we were the only people alive," said Rose, as she came out with the basin of batter for the pancakes that took the place of their daily bread.

They were more like the first dwellers in the garden of Eden than they knew, in that neither of them dreamed how much effort was necessary to turn such a primitive paradise into fields of wheat and corn and flax. The current of western emigration was sweeping through the country, and nineteen-yearold Robert Kellogg and his fifteen-year-old sister Rose had drifted into it. They had come partly because their father, in his lifetime, had purchased wild land out West, which now belonged to them, and partly because their home in the East, since the advent of the stepfather and his children, was not exactly comfortable for them. It had started in a moment of boyish desperation.

"Rose," Robert had said suddenly one evening, as he entered the kitchen where Rose was bending over the dish-pan, with red eyes and suspiciously stained cheeks, "Rose, let's emigrate! Let's go West. There's that land father bought, up in northern Iowa. Let's go and settle there, and have a home of our own. Would n't you like that?"

"I'd like to go anywhere," blazed Rose, "to Africa or Asia or the South Sea Islands, or anywhere that is n't here. Home is n't home any more."

It was not strange that the half-grown boy and girl should take their mother's second marriage hard, and perhaps their

elders did the wisest thing to let them go. But, in truth, their elders had very little idea of what life in a new country was like. They fitted out the young pioneers generously almost too generously for their own good, as far as money went - but they knew as little of the requirements of the new life as Rose and Robert themselves. The reason that counted the most in the mother's decision to let them go was that Robert was not as strong as she wished he were. His father had died of consumption, and they feared lest he should develop the same disease. The pure, clear, Iowa air, the doctors said, would be the best thing in the world for him. As for Rose, she simply must go where Robert did, and it seemed a very pleasant plan for them to make a little home together.

They went by railroad to Wisconsin. There the mover's outfit was purchased, under the supervision of a cousin, and the boy and girl started on their long ride to the untried West. Robert was a very sensible and manly boy for his years and felt that he could take care of his sister anywhere; and Rose would have gone to the end of the world with him gladly.

At first the journey in the white-covered prairie-schooner had seemed a continuous picnic. They passed through towns where provisions were bought; and boiling the camp kettle and making coffee over an outdoor fire was just fun. At night they stopped in towns or farmhouses. The country was beautiful in the greenness of June, and they enjoyed every day.

"I wish we might have a real adventure," said Rose one noon, as she scattered the brands of their dinner camp-fire, "a hair-breadth escape or something like that. It would be such fun to write back East about."

Robert looked grave and paternal. The picnic feeling was beginning to give place to a sense of large responsibility in the boy's mind.

"I think I'd rather not have any to write about," he said soberly.

They were still in a well-traveled country, and the road was plainly marked. But the settlements were growing fewer and farther apart. About three o'clock they came to a river which had no bridge. They were not disturbed over that. Rivers were commonly

crossed by fords or ferries in the less populated districts in those days.

They drove into the water unconcernedly enough. But, once in, the young driver found it deeper than it had seemed. The wheels sunk in more and more and at last stopped turning around. The wagon box was afloat. It was lucky that it was bound to the corner posts, or it would have floated off from them.

"Oh, Rob," cried Rose, clutching his arm, "it's too deep to cross here. Let's go back."

But it was too late to go back. "It's no use," said Rob; and then Rose comprehended that the horses were swimming. They were doing their best to get across, but they were fastened to the heavy load. With sudden terror, Rose saw that they were being swept down the river.

"Oh, what is going to happen? Are n't we going to get over? Are we going to be drowned, Rob?"

"I—can't—say." Robert's words came in curious jerks. "And don't you say—a word—Susan B. It does n't need—talking about." Rose might not have realized how great was the danger if it had not been for Rob's face, for she was used to trusting her brother implicitly. But as she glanced at him, a dreadful idea came to her.

"We are going to be drowned. Rob thinks so!"

On the shores of the river the sunshine lay warm and golden. The sparkles on the water were bright and glistening. Oh, it was impossible that this dreadful thing should be threatening them! Rose curled her feet up under her on the high seat to keep them dry as long as she could and stared with terrified eyes at the bubbles rushing past. The ford was far behind them. Was this the end of their journeying?

The faithful horses were making heroic efforts. After what seemed an endless time, they did get near the other shore. The lurching wagon grew firmer. The wheels began to turn around once more, and then they came to the other side.

The bank was slippery and soft, and it seemed as if they could not scramble up. Again and again they tried, and it gave way

beneath them. Rose sat holding her breath while Rob leaped out into the water, waded to the horses' heads, pulled himself up on the bank, and managed at last to work them up.

"Well, Susan B, do you want any more adventures?" he asked, as he turned to her all dripping and muddy. His face was as white as chalk, but his tone was cheery and bright.

"No," answered Rose fervently, "I don't want any more adventures — ever."

There was no use in trying to go farther that day. The best they could do was to camp beside the river bank and spread out their wet load and wet clothing to dry, thankful indeed for the warm sunshine that had seemed to mock them as they swept down the stream. The flour suffered most from the wetting.

"But that does n't matter," said Rose bravely. "Flour has to be mixed with water, anyway, and a little mixing beforehand can't spoil it." Luckily, the water had penetrated only the outer layer, and the inside was quite as good as ever. The mishap made them less trouble than might have been expected, but Rose's thirst for adventure was entirely quenched. Hereafter she hoped only for the commonplace.

After this the towns passed became fewer and smaller. Often they could find no place to buy bread or other provisions and from necessity were reduced to Rose's cooking.

Now cooking three meals a day on an open camp-fire is not the same as cooking over a well-equipped range in a kitchen. Fifteen-year-old Rose was far from proficient in the latter, and her tribulations over her little fire of sticks were many. Failure after failure was turned out from the covered skillet over the coals, but one and all were dispatched by the dauntless Robert, who never proved his heroism and real goodness more thoroughly than by sympathizing with his sister instead of scolding.

Rose took her failures sadly to heart. She had been rigidly trained in economy, and to spoil good materials seemed to her unforgivable. The fact that there was no lack of money in the household at home had been held up as a reason for carefulness, not prodi-

gality. "Only those who save are those who have," had been drilled into her from her earliest childhood. It almost broke her conscientious heart to find that she had wasted anything.

Among their stores had been a great sack of dried apples. Robert loved apple-sauce, and Rose felt, when she drew it out, that she was preparing a great treat. She brought the biggest camp kettle and filled it to the brim, for she meant to have plenty.

It was Sunday morning. She and Robert had been brought up to observe the Sabbath very strictly. They would n't think of traveling that day, and Rose had some qualms of conscience over cooking the apple-sauce, but it was the only day when she was sure of having sufficient time.

The camp-fire was burning unusually well. "I am really learning to manage," thought Rose with a smile, as she sat, chin in hand, watching the dancing flames and dreaming a pleasant dream of a cozy little kitchen where she would preside in the near future. Then her eyes closed without her knowing it. It was easier to drop to sleep in those days than

to keep awake. The long ride was more tiring than they realized.

A great hissing and sputtering sounded dimly through her dream. "Mother must be making candy for us," she thought drowsily. But Robert's voice interrupted the delightful sleeping visions and substituted stern waking reality.

"Hi, Susan B, what's the matter with your cooking? It's all running over," he shouted.

Rose's eyes opened suddenly, and dismay seized upon her soul. The dried apples were swelling and forcing themselves from under the lid of the kettle. One by one they were boiling over and dropping into the fire. It was the smell of their sugary burning that had brought candy-making to her mind. But this was no dear home frolic. It was dire calamity. Those dried apples were wasting!

Rose sprang up in frantic haste and brought out every dish in the outfit. Plates, basins, cups, saucers, skillet, everything they had, was filled with swollen, half-cooked, dried apples, and still the kettle overflowed. The

apples poured over into the fire in a heartrending stream.

Dinner was a difficult meal to get that day, for the only dishes in camp that were not full of half-cooked, dried apples were the knives, forks, and spoons. It was also a difficult meal to eat, for the fare was monotonous: and, being only half cooked, the apples were not really palatable. Still more difficult meals came after: for Rose and Robert, with their economical consciences, felt it a matter of duty to eat up every one of those dried apples. To throw any away was not to be thought of. "I hope I shall never see another dried apple again," said Rose, after a series of breakfasts, dinners, and suppers that seemed numberless had been made from them. But this was a feeling that soon passed away in the apple-less Northwest.

The sleepiness that grew upon the girl every day became a serious inconvenience. Though she sleept like a log every night, she seemed never to get sleep enough. Her head began to nod as soon as she climbed to her place on the high wagon-seat. She almost fell asleep standing on her feet.

"Robert, I don't know what is going to happen to me, because I am so sleepy all the time," she said, one sultry afternoon when the sunshine and shadows were lying slumbrously on the waving expanse of green. "I'm afraid I shall pitch over the dashboard. I have just caught myself two times."

"Well, I don't know as it would hurt you. The grass is soft," answered Robert, with assumed lightness. But he looked anxiously at the face beside him. Anything that concerned Rose was an anxiety to him. Was this journey too hard for her to have undertaken?

"Never mind, Susan B. Just stick it out a little longer till we get to our home, and then you can sleep all day if you want to," he said.

Home! Rose laughed out at the word. How good it sounded! How good it would be to stop this weary, seemingly endless travel, and settle down in a home of their own!

"What kind of a house will we have?" she asked. Strangely enough, she had not thought much of this before. She was still

like a child who accepts what comes without reasoning about it, and she had taken it for granted that a house would be waiting for them. Rob himself, for all his nineteen years, was not much wiser.

"Probably we shall have to have one built," he said lightly. "We will stay at a hotel until it is done. You will not mind that."

"Anywhere," answered Rose drowsily and then she gave a lurch. Her brother caught her just in time to save her from going over the wheel.

"I'm glad we're going to get to Harmony soon," he thought. "It's time Rose had a rest."

At noon, on the far horizon, they caught a glimpse of their new home.

"Look, look, Rose!" cried Rob, for once stirred out of his customary calmness. "There is Harmony!"

Far off in the distance, a steeple lifted itself against the sky. At one side of it was a little — a very, very little — group of low buildings.

"Where is the rest of the town?" asked inexperienced Rose.

"It must be the other side of a hill," answered no less inexperienced Robert. It did not occur to either of them that there might be no more of Harmony than this. They strained their eyes and imagined quite a city out of their vision.

"We are almost home! Almost home!" sang Rose to an accompaniment of creaking wheels.

Almost home in distance, but not in time. Just at the end of their journey came a delay that they had never thought likely to happen, although any old settler of the region would have expected nothing else.

All the last day their road had been only a faintly marked track on the prairie grass.

"How long and dark the grass is ahead of us," Rose said. "What makes it so different from the other grass, Rob?"

Rob could n't say — yet. His experience was to come. The resident of northern Iowa in early days learned to tell from the appearance of the slough grass alone whether the swamp could be crossed by his lumber wagon or not. But, after all, knowledge made little difference, for the swamps must

be crossed, and there was no way to do it but to get stuck and pull out.

Rob and Rose found it out very soon. Deeper and deeper sank the horses. They struggled and strained, but the wheels every minute went down farther, until they were covered almost to the hubs. The horses staggered and pulled in vain. They could not haul the wagon through the sticky mud.

"Get up, Templar! Get up, Peter!" cried Rob, again and again, bringing down the unaccustomed lash upon the backs of his faithful friends. They did their best, but no effort could stir the wagon. It was hopelessly stuck.

"Oh, what shall we do," wailed Rose. Her brother knew no better than she did, but he put on a brave, older-brother face.

"Just hold your horses, Susan B. I'll get us out of this," he said.

"They don't need any holding. They need pushing." Rose giggled faintly. Robert glared at her. Then he leaped from the wagon and, wading in mud and water to his waist, attempted to lead the horses through, but in vain.

"We're sinking in deeper every minute," cried Rose. "Sha'n't I get out and help you?"

"You sit where you are and keep clean," answered muddy Rob stoutly. "I'll get us out of this."

But in his heart he had not the faintest notion how to get out. He scanned the wide prairie. Not a sign of life on any side, for the swamp was so low that the roofs of the tiny settlement had disappeared from view. He coaxed and patted his horses, and they did their best to start the load, but they might as well have been pulling on a loaded freight car. Gloomy visions of staying in the slough all night began to fill Rose's brain, but at last, after what seemed ages, they caught sight of an approaching speck in the distance. A long period of anxious watching followed; truly there was a wideness to the prairies.

"It's a cow!" Rob said more than once; but at last they perceived clearly that the approaching shape was a man driving a single horse in a light buggy.

He saw them and shouted before he was

near enough for them to understand his words. As he drew closer, they saw that the buggy was very new and shining, without a splash on its glossy dashboard. Very spick and span and elegant the man was, too, for this was the new county treasurer celebrating the purchase of the only single rig in the settlement by driving to the metropolis of the region, twenty-five miles away, to attend church on the next day.

"We can't ask that man to help us out of the mud. He's all dressed up, and he'd spoil his clothes," said Rob, with a groan, wishing the newcomer had been a farmer in overalls instead.

Not help them? He was out of the new buggy in an instant, and had unhitched his prancing horse and tied him to the wheel,—the only available hitching-place. He was pulling off the beautiful, shiny boots, and rolling up the elegantly immaculate trousers. Then, taking a coil of rope from under his buggy seat, he came wading toward them through the mud and water.

"I'll get you out in a jiffy," he said cheerily. Splash, splash, he came through the mud and water, where Rob was standing hipdeep in the mire, and Rose disconsolately sitting on the high seat of the immovable prairie-schooner.

Splash, splash, splash! Did ever an angel of help appear in such guise before, with such ruddy hair and such mud-bespattered garb? Was ever an angel of help more welcome?

"You should n't travel around here without a rope in your wagon. You're liable to get stuck in every slough," he said, as he helped to unhitch the two horses and lead them through the mud to firm ground. Then he tied the rope to the tongue of the wagon, and hitched to the rope Rob's two horses and his own single one.

"We need all the pull we can get," he said. But though the three horses pulled with all their might, the wagon did not stir. It was too deeply embedded to be moved.

The muddy, red-haired, assisting angel gave a comical sigh.

"It's no use. I hoped we could get along without it, but we can't. We'll have to unload the wagon, and lug the things over to the other side on our backs. I did it dozens of times when our family came to this region. Then the horses can pull out the empty wagon."

So he and Rob loaded the household stuff and the farm implements, that Rob had brought so far, on their shoulders, and waded across the slough, carrying them. Back and forth they went again and again, getting more wet and muddy each trip. Rose wanted to help, too, but they would not let her. They made a chair of their hands, and carried her dry-shod to the other side.

"How kind he is!" thought Rose, looking gratefully at the ruddy, mud-bespattered face crowned with ruddy, mud-bespattered hair. "I don't believe folks back East would spoil their new clothes for a strange boy and girl. I wonder if all the people out West are like him!"

The prairie-schooner was pulled out, then re-loaded, as much mud scraped off as was possible, and the two conveyances proceeded on their opposite ways. Rose was much distressed at the appearance of the once

elegant county treasurer, but he made light of it.

"That's nothing. We people out here are used to mud. I'll get it all scraped off before I go to church," he said; and with a friendly good-by he drove off.

CHAPTER II

THE ARRIVAL

Twas sunset when they reached the little settlement, and the overpowering weariness of the last days of the journey had again seized upon Rose. She could scarcely hold herself up on the seat. With sleep-dimmed eyes she beheld the brand-new, red brick court-house in process of erection, its unfinished steeple glowing like a shaft of flame in the last rays of the sun, and two tiny houses and a shanty beside it.

"Where is the hotel?" she asked drowsily. Nothing seemed to matter to her just then, except to find a place where she could go to sleep.

Robert was beginning to think anxiously of the same question. He had imagined that the rest of the settlement was beyond a hill, but, behold! there was no hill. Could it be that this was all there was of Harmony, the county-seat of Adams County, that had

looked so large and imposing on the map? If so, where were they to go till a house could be built?

The tiny town was very still in the ruddy light. There were no hens to cackle and no dogs to bark at a disturber. It was too new for that. It was just the hour when everybody in the settlement was at supper. But at the rumble of wheels, the supper-tables were deserted, and the entire population rushed out to see the newcomers.

Rose's sleep-clouded eyes took in very little. Dimly she perceived that there were a lot of men, mostly workmen, two women, and one child. A very tall, blue-eyed settler came up to them first, all the others stepping back to make way for him.

It was fitting that Jason Elbridge, the clerk of the newly organized county, should be the first to greet every one who came into the settlement, for he was the first settler and the most influential citizen in it. He came forward with a face full of friendliness, a kindly, efficient man of much ability and little speech, who was the prime mover in every affair of moment in the whole region,

held a dozen offices of trust, and was the refuge and helper and adviser of every citizen, new and old, in the county. His height and an amused twinkle in the blue eyes abashed shy Rose, but his friendly look made her grasp his outstretched hand like that of an old acquaintance, and reassured her in spite of her bashfulness.

It was a time for observation and speculation on the new surroundings, but Rose did not wonder or speculate. Like a tired child she took what was given her and did what she was told. She mechanically answered the questions that were showered on her, and only one stuck in her memory. It was a question of the tall, kindly-eyed county clerk.

"Was n't your mother rather risky in sending out her only girl like this?" he asked.

"I don't know. We did n't think of it," answered Rose wearily.

"Where is the hotel?" Robert's voice was inquiring. The question seemed to amuse his hearers.

"Listen to the boy! He thinks this is a

city," said a workman, with a carpenter's rule sticking out of his pocket, in a very audible aside to one whose clothes were bedaubed with lime and plaster.

"It's about as much as city folks know of the West," answered the other. But Mr. Elbridge answered as cordially as a father might.

"We don't have hotels yet in this country. It's too new for that. We settlers help each other out. You will stay at my house."

Rob looked aghast at the tiny house and the group of men.

"No hotel? Then where do all these people stay?" he gasped.

"Some of them at my house, some at the other over there, some in the shanty; and those there is n't room for in any of those places sleep on the floor in the down-stairs part of the court-house, that is finished up. The workmen eat at the shanty, and the rest at my house."

"Is there no boarding-house where my sister and I can board?" asked Rob, much troubled.

"No, nothing like it. But people always

stay with us. Mrs. Elbridge can curtain off a place for your sister, and you can sleep in the wagon till the meeting of supervisors is over. You will eat with us, of course. There's plenty of room. We are making up only five beds on our floor now."

"But I mean some place where we can board and pay for it," said Robert.

"We don't take pay for being neighborly in a new country like this. Come in! Supper is all on the table. Your sister looks tired out, and I'll be bound you will feel better yourself with a good hot supper inside of you. Come in!"

There was no question about the last statement. The hospitable, little, one-roomed house seemed like a haven of rest to the weary travelers, and nothing in the world ever smelled more appetizing than that fried prairie chicken and hot soda-biscuit with milk gravy.

Rose fairly nodded over her plate. But the Saturday night instinct was strong within her, and she bravely attempted to set their clothes in order for Sunday. To her dismay, she found that her needle-case was gone. "Could you — could you — lend me a needle."

She meant to ask the pioneer's wife; but somehow the question got addressed to the tall, kindly pioneer. His eyes twinkled over her hesitancy, and he brought out the desired article.

"This is a very valuable needle," he said in his impressive, deliberate way. "My mother gave it to me when I was a boy, and I value it very highly. Be sure to take good care of it and return it in good order."

He was only joking. It was one of his ways. But his voice sounded very solemn, and poor Rose took it for deadly earnest.

"I'll be very careful," she murmured; and then, to her confusion and dismay, she broke out the eye of the needle. Perhaps she never found anything in her life harder to do than to take back the broken needle and apologize for the accident. The county clerk's eyes twinkled still more; but Rose did not understand that it was fun in them, and not until she was quite grown up did she realize it was meant for a joke.

"I'm sorry, very sorry," he said with great

apparent concern. "But perhaps it is n't altogether spoiled. Perhaps we can drill another eye into it."

Poor Rose was overwhelmed with sorrow and mortification. She had nothing to do now — for she would have died sooner than ask for the loan of another needle — but to sit up very stiff and straight and uncomfortable in the wooden chair set out for her and listen miserably to the conversation around her.

. Mrs. Elbridge was rocking little Totty to sleep in the clumsy, red-painted, wooden cradle. Rose would have liked to offer to rock the child for her, but was too bashful. She sat bolt upright in her chair and listened as much as she could to the talk that went on, while she wondered where there could be a place to put a bed for her, much less a room.

The talk was all about the hardships and difficulties of the prairie pioneer life. They told of the great blizzards of winter that swept pitilessly over the treeless levels, blotting out every landmark, of settlers lost in them and frozen to death within a few rods of their own doors. They told of prairie fires that spread as fast as a horse could trot

and devoured everything that came in their path. They told of snakes coiled up in prairie grass, snakes dropping from unexpected places, till Rose, who dreaded the very name of snake, fairly quivered with terror.

One of the most thrilling stories was about Naylor, the red-haired, assisting angel who had helped them out of their doleful plight in the swamp that day, who held the office of county treasurer. It was a story of how this undaunted individual, when walking in the middle of the prairie, miles away from house or help of any kind, with no weapon and not so much as a stick or stone at hand, had suddenly been confronted by a rattlesnake coiled up to strike. Not a whit frightened, he coolly pulled off one of his boots and proceeded to dispatch the enemy by striking it with the heavy heel. Then he put the boot on again and went on unruffled, with half a dozen rattles in his pocket as a trophy.

"Where is Naylor?" asked one of the carpenters who worked on the court-house, looking around as if there were a decided vacancy in the familiar group. "He drove to Sanders City, to church, he said. But I think it was to show off his new clothes and his new buggy."

"He'd better not let his hair touch those new clothes, or it will set fire to them."

"Now see here!" There was indignation in the tone of the man who answered. "Naylor's all right! He may be red-headed, but I'd rather see his red head coming if I was in any trouble than a dozen others all together."

Rose's mind went back gratefully to their rescuer of the afternoon. He was redheaded — red-headed — red — The flickering candle danced before her sleepy eyes. She envied little Totty her clumsy, wooden cradle. Oh, if only she could lie down and go to sleep! The whole room seemed to whirl around her in a reeling dance. There was one moment of blissful oblivion, then a crash. Rose had dropped to sleep and fallen from her chair.

She started up, mortified and trembling. "You are all tired out," said the settler's wife. "You must go to bed right away."

"Yes, ma'am, I'd like to," answered Rose

meekly, wondering again where a bed for her could be placed. But this was briskly arranged when Mrs. Elbridge rose to the occasion.

First she drew the calico curtain across the corner of the room that contained the one bedstead, which, till that time, had of necessity served as a seat. From this she fastened a piece of clothes-line to a second corner, and over it hung a big green and black plaid blanket shawl. Behind this gay curtain, a bed was soon spread on the floor, for a pile of straw-filled ticks and bedclothes quite filled a third corner and were quickly brought out and laid down with an accustomed touch. Into this bed Rose slipped with a sigh of blissful content and was asleep almost before her head touched the pillow.

She did not hear when the other "down beds" were made up. She did not hear when they were taken up in the morning, as was necessary before there was room to get breakfast. She slept on and on—

"Ain't you ever doin' to det up?"
The shawl curtain was pulled impatiently

aside by a chubby hand. A pair of baby eyes, blue as the county clerk's, looked reproachfully at this stranger, who was so long in getting acquainted. The noon sunshine was pouring into the little window. Rose had slept fifteen hours.

"Dinner's weady," went on the little voice. "Mummy said I tould tell oo to det up. The men want to tum in."

Rose sprang up suddenly with a feeling that she had done something very wrong indeed. She was trained to early rising, and lying abed in the morning was a very grave fault. She dressed herself with nervous haste. It is not easy to dress behind a shawl, and Rose's appearance might not have pleased her fastidious mother; but the pioneer group considered that there was nothing more to be desired in the way of looks when she stepped out from her primitive chamber in her pretty blue gingham gown, her long lashes shyly drooped, her round cheeks flushed very pink indeed, and her soft black hair rippling and crinkling about the small head. The men were standing in a group outside the door, and dinner was just ready to be put on

the table. Robert looked down at her in brotherly reproof.

"How could you sleep so long, Susan B?" he asked reproachfully. "It's lucky for us that we did n't have to depend on you for breakfast and dinner."

Mr. Elbridge looked at her quizzically and proceeded to try her nerve by a series of questions that was far from encouraging.

"Can you cook?" he asked.

"Well, I am learning. I cooked for Robert and me all the last part of our coming here."

"Hm-m! You will find that quite a necessary accomplishment out here. Can you make bread?"

"No, sir. Mother said it was just as cheap to buy bread for only two."

"Hm-m! Where did she think you could buy it? Well, Mrs. Elbridge will teach you how to make it. Can you make cake?"

"I think I could, sir. I made one once."

"Can you clean a prairie chicken?"

"I — I never did."

"Can you kill a snake?"

"I — I never tried, sir. We don't have to do that back East."

"We have to do it here. You must learn how, the first thing."

Rose looked distressed and was very glad when the call to dinner put an end to the catechism. Mrs. Elbridge was a wonderfully good cook, and over one of her dinners no one took time to ask uncomfortable questions. After dinner Rose helped with the work, and then she did not know what to do.

In truth the Sabbath was apt to drag in the pioneer settlements. This one day when they did not work was harder to put in than all the six when they labored from dawn till dark. There was no church service to go to in all the county. The nearest neighbors were miles away. The few books and papers they owned had all been read over and over again. There was nothing to take up their time but to walk aimlessly over the prairie or sit in the shade of the house and talk; and there was very little new to say.

Rose had had a great many rebellious thoughts in the old home because her mother had insisted that she must go to morning and evening service and Sabbath-school every Sunday. Now she would have been glad to attend four services.

Robert thoroughly enjoyed hearing the men talk and being with them, for it was all new to him, but Rose's training had made her feel that she must not go where the men were. She was painfully shy, and afraid even of kind Mrs. Elbridge. If it had not been for sociable little Totty, who immediately attached herself to the newest person in the settlement, Rose might not have been able to finish the afternoon without disgracing herself by a homesick burst of crying.

Two-year-old Totty was the darling of every soul in Harmony. She was one of the most independent babies that ever walked. From the crown of her silky, straight, light hair to the toe of her stubby, little shoe, there breathed forth a spirit of irresistible attraction. She had a chubby, square, little figure, and an indescribable air that was as amusing and lovable as the sauciness of an inch-long wren. She was delighted to have a new slave to her baby whims; and Rose patiently took out things from her boxes and answered Totty's funny questions most of

the afternoon. In the mean time she was observing the conditions around her.

The night before she had been too tired to look or think. To her bewildered senses. it had seemed as if every soul in the settlement must live at the hospitable Elbridge home. She found out now that the only permanent dwellers there were the county clerk, his wife, and baby daughter. But a pioneer felt bound to entertain every one who came to the settlement, and there was scarcely a day in the summer when the little house did not hold from one to a dozen guests. The present crowded condition was due to a meeting of the county board of supervisors; but there was always something or other filling it up. Kind Mr. Elbridge never let any one pass his door without a cordial invitation to enter and stay, and people came from far and near to consult him about all sorts of perplexities.

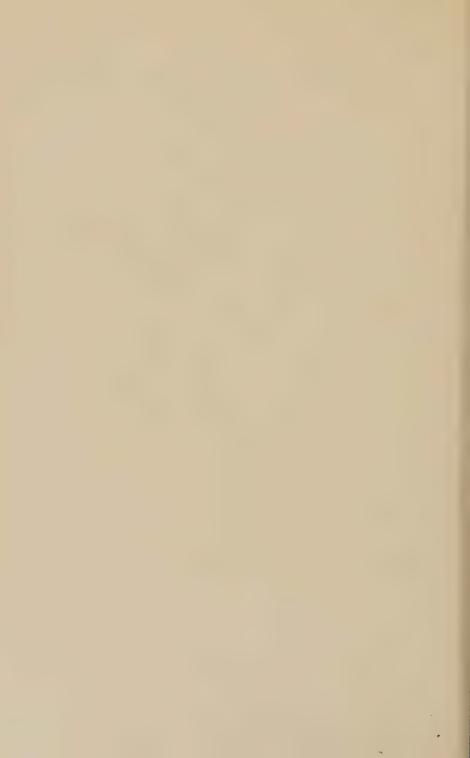
Mrs. Elbridge was a wonderful housekeeper, but even her abilities, were stretched to the utmost by the demands of a household which might vary at any hour from three to twenty. The marvels of work she accomplished would

seem impossible to a modern woman equipped with all the modern improvements for homekeeping. She cooked for her varying family with green wood on a curious little stove with the oven on top — an oven whose utmost capacity was two pies at a time. She kept the little, one-roomed house as neat as a pin always, though she did all her washing and ironing and sewing and cooking and baking, and there was no "help" to be obtained for love or money. She cheerfully laid down and took up so many "down beds" on her little floor that there was not the least space of room left to walk around and get breakfast in until they were taken up in the morning. She patiently endured summer's heat of from ninety to a hundred degrees and not one bit of shade, and winter's cold when the thermometer went down far below zero and stayed there for weeks at a time.

Everything she did was accomplished with such marvelous quickness and skill that it was quite discouraging to a green hand to watch her. But she was a quiet woman, full of a mingled dignity and shyness that made it not at all easy to get acquainted with her;



It seemed very long to Rose before the afternoon wore away and darkness came. Page 39.



and, kind as she was, Rose was so much afraid of doing something bunglingly that she was far from easy in her presence.

The workmen were building the new court-house, laying the brick and doing the inside and outside carpentry. They had their own cook and ate in the temporary shanty which had been put up for them. The second house in the settlement was exactly like the Elbridge home and had been put up at the same time by the county as residence and office of the county treasurer; but as Naylor, the present incumbent, was unmarried, it was used now as a temporary court-house, held the records and desks of all the officials, and was the meeting place of the board of supervisors and other officers.

It seemed very long to Rose before the afternoon wore away and darkness came. Totty had deserted her for the lap of a supervisor, who had a watch that would open and show wonderful wheels. As the shadows crept over the prairie, Rose was assailed by an irresistible wave of homesickness.

Back East her refuge from all her troubles had been her cats There had been six of

them of various ages, from Peggy Polly Perinthia Pippins down to tiny Popocatepetl, the latest descendant. She had wanted to bring one with her on her overland journey, but it had not seemed best.

"You can find a cat when you get there," Rob had said decisively. "Cats are easy to pick up." It had not occurred to either of them that any country could be too new for cats.

Rose's wistful eyes had seen no kitty since her arrival, and her bashful tongue had refused to make inquiries. But still she thought there might be one somewhere about. She would have given half her possessions for a cat to cuddle just then. She slipped out of the door in the twilight hoping to find one.

And there! oh, joy! There, crouching by the farthest corner of the house, she saw the prettiest little kitty that ever gladdened the heart of a homesick girl. Black and white it was in beautiful stripes; and even in the half light she could see that its fur was as soft and fine as velvet.

"Kitty, kitty, kitty! Come kitty, kitty, kitty!" called Rose in rapture, moving softly toward it.

"Kitty, kitty, kitty!"
She bent over to pick it up.

"Don't touch it! It's a skunk!" cried an imperative voice. "Run away as quick as you can. Run into the house. If you let it alone, it may go away without making any trouble."

Rose scurried into the house as fast as her feet could carry her. She knew well enough, theoretically, what a skunk was. She had heard of the dreadful odor that it casts abroad when angered, an odor that no washing or scouring can take out. She had no wish for a practical demonstration. But she was dreadfully mortified at the mistake she had made. Oh, how that roomful of men would laugh at her when they heard of it. How Mr. Elbridge's eyes would twinkle! How Rob would tease her! Which of the men could it be who had warned her? Oh, if only she could induce him not to tell the joke! She would be willing to pay any amount to keep the rest from knowing it.

Slowly and reluctantly she advanced into the room, wishing with all her heart that she need never enter it again. But the men were all sitting as they had been before. There was no one missing. They did not notice her at all.

"When 's Naylor coming back," the supervisor with the watch was saying rather wishfully. Guests and residents seemed to miss him.

"To-night. He may be here any minute," answered the county clerk; and just then the door opened and the red-haired treasurer stepped in. Rose's cheeks flamed. It was Naylor then who had warned her. He would tell the story as a very great joke, and they would all laugh.

In an agony of mortification she looked about for a place to hide from sight, but there was none but out of doors, and she did not dare to go there again. She would have sunk through the floor gladly if it had been possible. As it was not, she sat rigidly and waited for the roar of laughter that must come.

But it did not come. The treasurer did not so much as mention the mortifying adventure. With a few commonplace remarks such as any one would be likely to make, he acknowledged his previous unconventional introduction to the settlement's latest arrivals, and then turned the conversation to the place he had been visiting and the improvements that had been made there since spring. Anything in regard to improvements in the region was a most interesting topic to the early settlers of Iowa. They talked about it eagerly and forgot the newcomers altogether.

"He does n't mean to tell," thought Rose; and she regarded him with even more gratitude than when he had rescued them from the slough. Timidly she drew her chair nearer and began to listen. She was really surprised when bedtime came. The evening that had begun so dolefully had ended in real pleasure.

CHAPTER III

FIRST EXPERIENCES

HE next morning Rose was awakened early by the booming of the prairie chickens, and she held her eyes rigidly open until the household should stir. She was determined to get up early and accomplish a great deal of work. To wash on Monday was as much a part of the plan of living in which Rose had been trained as to go to church on Sunday. She had been quite overcome by the discovery that there was no church to go to, and she was equally surprised to find that her hostess did not observe the traditional wash-day.

"Wait till I wash, and put your clothes in with mine, and I will help you," said the kind-hearted pioneer's wife, doubting, with good reason, whether those soft little hands had ever done a washing.

They never had; and the washing was a big one, for there had been no opportunity

to get it done on their wagon journey, but Rose was too independent to take help.

"Thank you, but I'd rather do it myself," she said, with a shyness that sounded like ungraciousness.

"Are you sure you know how?" asked Mrs. Elbridge.

"Oh, yes, I know how," answered Rose; and after that she would n't have asked a question if her life depended on it.

In truth, Mr. Elbridge's catechism of yesterday had stung her. Confess that she did n't know how to do things by asking Mrs. Elbridge's help? Indeed, she never would. She would learn by herself if it killed her. "Mrs. Elbridge has enough to do without helping me," said Rose proudly.

It was true; but Rose carried her independence to such lengths that she missed much help that her kind friends would have been glad to give, and made her pioneering much harder for her than it needed to be. She had a morbid horror of letting anybody do anything for her. She could scarcely bear to touch anything that was not her own, for fear she might spoil it. She accepted

the loan of some clothes-pins when the pioneer's wife pressed them upon her, but she spent many precious minutes marking her own with a lead pencil before she would take the others out of the high, old, stiff, silk hat in which they reposed when not in use.

It was Rob's manifest duty to bring her barrels of soft water from the nearest slough for her washing. But Rob, though he was as good a boy as ever walked, liked his own way, and he decided that it would be easier for his sister to carry the clothes down to the slough and wash them there. This arrangement suited Rose very well, for she was so overwhelmed with modesty that she could hardly bear the thought that any one, even Robert, should see her wash hung out to dry. He made a clever framework to hold the boiler over the fire, filled it to the brim, and was bidden to depart. This he willingly did on the instant.

It was not so easy a task as inexperienced Rose had expected. The fire was hard to manage. The boiler would not heat. Again and again she took off the cover and thrust her hand into the water to find that it was

not yet hot enough. It was really a great deal of trouble.

"Hateful thing!" said Rose. "The more I watch it, the more it won't heat up. I sha'n't lift that clumsy old cover again till I know it is ready."

She thought she could tell by touching the outside of the boiler whether the water was hot or not. So she could, but alas! she had no experience in gauging the heating power of an outdoor fire.

It looked very harmless and provokingly cold, and Rose drew her little pink forefinger boldly up the tin side. Alas, most disastrous results followed. A shining smear of bright, melted tin marked the motion of the soft little finger, and it was cruelly burned.

Oh, how it did smart! Rose fairly screamed with the sudden pain. She shook her hands in agony, but that did not ease the sting. Then she sat down on a pile of soiled clothes and cried, but that did not help matters, either. She was ashamed to go to the house. At last she took a soft old handkerchief and tore it into bandages, which she managed with difficulty to wind around the injured mem-

ber. Then, for Rose had the spirit of a hero, she went on with her work.

Only Rose knew how hard that day was. It was a revelation to the untried girl. Washing seems easy enough when you watch some strong-armed, accustomed housewife bending over the pretty white suds, but it is a different matter to a fifteen-year-old, trying under adverse conditions to do it for the first time without help.

It took four times as long as she had expected. The water in her tubs was increased by more than one tear-drop before she finished. Worse than this, the clothes, that she labored so hard over, refused to look white like her mother's, in spite of her most diligent rubbing and boiling. Her burned finger ached and smarted. The rub-board made her knuckles raw. She had worked for hours in the hot sun with sleeves rolled up above the elbow, and the poor, slim arms that had been so pretty and tender and white were burned fiery red and covered with blisters. It was four o'clock before the last tub was emptied, and tired Rose breathed a sigh of relief.

"At any rate, there is n't any kitchen floor to scrub," she said, trying her best to be cheerful as she spread out the last garment on the grass to dry. She had not used the clothes-pins after all. Rob had declared that to put up a line was foolishness.

"You can dry your clothes on the grass just as well, Susan B," he had said, as if he knew all about it; and Rose, who was, as we have said, foolishly afraid lest some one should see them drying, had assented readily.

She was completely tired out when she went back to the house. Mrs. Elbridge bound up her burned arms with oil and cool cloths, and Rose threw herself across the foot of the bed to rest "just for a minute." The minute lengthened itself unconsciously, and she slept till supper time. She wakened when little Totty called out in her baby voice:

"Mummy, mummy, the men are all tummin' here. Mummy, see! What have they dot in their hands?"

What, indeed? Each man had his arms full of white or vari-colored garments.

"We found these things blowing over the prairie, Mrs. Elbridge," said the red-haired

treasurer gravely, but with a twinkle in his blue eyes. "We thought they must be your washing, so we brought them in. Such a time as we had chasing them! It was more exciting than wolf-hunting. I hope we got them all. We had to run a long way after some of them."

If only Rob had kept still! Then they might have thought the clothes were Mrs. Elbridge's. But it was not in boy nature to do that. He thought it was the hugest of jokes, and the rest of the settlement seemed to agree with him. Rose was exceedingly mortified. She could n't eat any supper and Robert, altogether unconscious that he had told anything that would trouble her, was quite worried over her unaccountable loss of appetite. She would have given anything she owned to slip out of sight and she went to bed as soon as it was possible.

The next day Rob and Mr. Elbridge drove to Shanley's Grove in the lumber wagon. It was a blue time for Rose, though she tried to fill it up by ironing diligently. She was stiff and sore from her efforts of the day before, and her burned arms pained her constantly.

It was little wonder that, as the hours went on, she grew thoroughly homesick. The settler's wife saw and understood. She said nothing, but she laid aside the work that was so pressing and took up her sunbonnet.

"Come with me and I'll show you what I used to look at when I first came here," she said.

She led the way outside toward a little knoll, perhaps a quarter of a mile from the house. The pounding of the hammers of the men who were working on the new courthouse sounded cheerily, but in spite of this the uninhabited prairie around them seemed very still and wide and lonesome. But the settler's wife did not speak of this. Homesickness was a thing not to be mentioned in pioneer days.

Totty trotted along joyously, holding a hand of each. Pioneer babies were not lone-some. The still, wide prairie was to them but an immense playground.

"There," said Mrs. Elbridge, when they reached the top of the knoll, pointing to the southwest, "there is a grove of trees. On clear days like this you can see it quite

plainly. I used to come here whenever I got a longing to see something like home. You see, we lived right near a grove at home and I missed trees so."

Rose looked long at the blue outline against the level horizon. "Do you mean that those are really the only trees in sight?" she asked wondering.

"The only trees in sight. They grow on an island in a big swamp. It is called Indian Island because a band of Indians used to go there and camp every summer. They like trees. I do, too. But about here there is n't even so much as a switch to punish little children with when they are naughty."

She smiled down at little Totty as she spoke, and the child laughed back with an irresistible, defiant uplift of the dimpled chin. But there was a catch in the mother's voice; and Rose was astonished to perceive that there were tears in her eyes.

"You see I was the only woman here—the only one for miles and miles. When the county was located, Mr. Elbridge had to come. It is lonely now, but you can't think how lonesome it was then, when there

was nobody else. For months there would n't be a soul here but our two selves. I used to look and look out over the prairie to see if somebody might not be coming, till I think I strained my eyes doing it."

For a long time they stood gazing over the green expanse and thinking thoughts that the girl was too shy and the woman too reserved to express. It was very lovely, with the wind rippling the grassy expanse that stretched as far as the eye could reach, but very lonely, too. To Rose it seemed like nothing else so much as the ocean with level rolling waves of green. Unconsciously she caught herself looking for glimpses of white sails. Something white was coming. What was it?

"Oh, see, there's a woman coming; a woman in white!" she cried eagerly. But the first settler's wife shook her head.

"I've been fooled lots of times that way myself," she said. "But that's not a person at all. It's only a sandhill crane. But there, toward the southwest, — there is a man coming."

It was such a small and shapeless black

speck that Rose would not have recognized it as anything human. But Mrs. Elbridge

spoke confidently.

"It's Boulter, the county recorder. Mr. Elbridge said there was some business to attend to. He lives on a farm twenty miles away."

"Does he come walking? Does n't he have any horses?"

"Oh, yes, he has horses. Fine ones! But he says it is easier to walk than to get horses through the sloughs between his farm and here."

"How does he get across?"

"He wades through them. A man won't get stuck where a horse will. Often he takes off his clothes and carries them in a bundle to keep them dry; and sometimes he has broken the ice in front of him as he waded. But when it's cold enough to freeze solid, the horses can get across anywhere."

"And this" — Rose shivered — "this is the country where they sent my brother to get strong."

"Oh, he'll get strong out here. Everybody does. This is a fine country for that. Nobody can be sick, because you see there is n't a doctor anywhere in the county, and nobody ever is sick, except that we all have the ague when the sod is first turned; but we don't mind that. Now I must go back and put Totty to sleep and then go at her new dress."

"I'll put Totty to sleep so that you can go to sewing right away," said Rose gratefully.

But Totty turned contrary and refused to go to slumberland. For an hour Rose labored patiently with her. She sang her lullaby songs. She told sleepy stories. But the wilful little eyes were pulled open every time they dropped shut. She would not go to sleep.

"Don't bother with her any more," said the pioneer's wife, bending over her cutting laid out on the bed. "We'll put her to sleep early to-night."

So Rose released the child from her arms, and Totty slipped down to the floor and began piling up the blocks that the men working on the court-house had sawed for her. But it was no fun to stay awake when

nobody cared. Totty curled up like a little ball on the floor and let her eyes shut. In forty winks she was very fast asleep. Rose started to take her up and put her in the cradle, but gave up the notion, fearing it would rouse little Miss Obstinacy again. The very air was drowsy.

"I'd like to take a nap myself," thought Rose. She rested her head on her hand and lost herself in a dream. Drowsily to her dulled ears there sounded through it a rattling unheard before.

"It's the sewing-machine," thought Rose, sleepily, forgetting how far from home and the unceasing hum that had sounded through the weeks that she was preparing for her journey, she was now. But the mother threw down her shears and sprang forward with a cry of terror.

"Where 's the baby?" she gasped.

Rose pointed to the floor where the child lay asleep. Then she, too, was horror-stricken. Coiled up on the doorstep, not three feet from the sleeping child, was a rattlesnake. The sound they had heard was a signal of the early settlers' most deadly enemy.

With one bound the mother snatched up the child and darted back to the window. "Come," she called to Rose, as she clambered fearfully outside. "Come and get out here."

But Rose made no move to follow. If it were a rattlesnake, it must be killed. So much the stories of the first day had told her.

She looked about her, trembling, for a weapon. Most blessedly, the settler's ax had been set inside the house. Rose seized it and advanced with trembling limbs and wildly beating heart.

Still the dreadful rattle was sounding. The snake was preparing to strike at her, now. She lifted the ax. Down it came with a stroke that was surprisingly sure, considering how frightened and inexperienced was the hand that wielded it. Again and again it descended. That rattlesnake would never cause trouble again.

The men who had been at work on the court-house came running up, summoned by Mrs. Elbridge's scream. At their head came Rob and Mr. Elbridge, just returned from their journey. How Rob's long legs did

stride over the ground! It seemed to Rose as if she had not seen him for years. The ax dropped from her shaking fingers, and she ran to his arms and hid her face on his shoulder as a little child might have done.

"Are you hurt, Susan B?" he gasped, with a face whiter than her own. "Did the rattle-snake bite you?"

"No, I'm all right, and the snake did n't get a chance to touch anybody. But, oh, Rob, it frightened me so!" She clung to him, feeling suddenly very weak and trembling. "It would have bitten the baby; and it was I who let her go to sleep on the floor. I don't want to stay here, Rob. I shall be afraid every minute of my life."

"There, there! You don't need to feel so!" soothed the baby's father, though his own face was ghastly with the thought of what might have been. "You're the bravest girl in the county. You'll make a settler worth having. Not stay here? Why, we want you the worst way. But you must n't get frightened at killing a snake. If you had n't killed him, there would have been something to be frightened at. The boys

and girls in our county kill snakes just for fun. Rob and I passed the schoolhouse at Shanley's Grove to-day, and the fence in front was hung with snakes, — more than fifty, I should think. The children think it's the best kind of fun to kill them."

"T is n't fun," cried Rose with a shudder.
"I wish I might never see another snake as long as I live. I'm more afraid of them than I ever was before. Oh, just think of what it might have done!"

Then, by way of reassuring her, they all stood around and told snake stories. Rose, shrinking close to Rob's side, had to listen to more tales that made her quiver from head to foot. They told of snakes dropping down from sod walls, of snakes crawling out from cracks and knot-holes in floors. She heard of a snake that dropped out of a woman's shoe when she lifted it to put it on; of a snake that fell from the ceiling down on the teacher's desk, when a class in school was reciting. Every minute seemed more dreadful. The only one who gave her any crumb of comfort was the red-haired treasurer.

"There are not so many snakes now as

there used to be," he said. "A spring or two ago a big prairie fire swept over the county after all the snakes were out of their holes, and burned a lot of them up. It may be that you will never see a rattlesnake about here again."

The business that had taken Rob and Mr. Elbridge to Shanley's Grove had been quite successful. They had gone to see whether they could not get a house moved up from there for the brother and sister. It was quite impossible to have one built. All the lumber had to be hauled a hundred miles in lumber wagons, and every carpenter about was more than busy. A very tiny building, which had been put up by the county before the county-seat was located at Harmony, was standing empty. It was very small, but in its very smallness lay its feasibility. It was to be purchased from the county, put on rollers and hauled to the county-seat by ox-teams.

So now Robert and Rose were to have a home. Rose was very happy thinking of it. She wanted to go and live in it right away and stay in it while it was being moved. It

was with difficulty that the kind Elbridges could persuade her to stay with them while the reconstructed county office was being made ready.

Such a tiny home! You could stand in the center and touch every wall with a broomstick. It had two windows and one door; and it was well that they did not have much furniture, for they could not possibly have set it up.

All that they had was what they had carried in the mover's wagon. Other necessities they manufactured from wooden boxes and had no end of fun over it. Rob's bed was a tick filled with prairie hay, laid down on the floor at night and taken up by day; but he insisted that Rose should have a bed-stead. A primitive bedstead it was, for none could be purchased. It was supported by four bunches of shingles, borrowed temporarily from the lumber for the court-house. Across these, springy pine boards were laid, and over this the tick. They were prouder of this than they would have been of the finest spring bed to be bought.

With no less pride they regarded their

kitchen outfit. The table was a dry-goods box, which also served as a bureau. The chairs were all boxes or nail-kegs, except one which was contributed by Mr. Elbridge. This was called the easy-chair and was brought forward on all occasions of ceremony; and it would have been easy if it had not lost its back. Rose's rolling-pin was a stone ink-bottle, which had originally held a county supply of writing fluid. Her molding-board was a white cotton cloth spread on top of the dry-goods-box table. Her gridiron was a broken piece of oven grate, with a handle made of a section of broomstick.

It was a queer little house, more like a doll's playhouse than a home, but Rose and Robert took great comfort in it. Yet as the season went on they discovered that it had drawbacks. One of them was a habit of leaking when it rained. They did not discover this until the middle of the night. Rose, sleeping in blissful ignorance of weather or surroundings, suddenly found her pleasant dreams broken by a trickle of cold water dropping over the tip of her nose. She reached up her hand to brush it aside, but it

would not brush away. She thought Rob was teasing her.

"Go away," she murmured fretfully, only half awake. But the persistent trickle only became more maddening. A second stream of water began to pour down her neck. A third dripped on her hair. Then a growl of thunder deafened her ears.

She was thoroughly awake now and frightened. The air was alternately blindingly bright with flashes of lightning and dark with the deepest blackness. The rain pelted down as if it would break the roof. It was an awful storm.

"I must go and see to the horses," cried Rob, springing up. "They may be frightened." It was kind-hearted of him; but, oh, why did n't he think of his sister, who might also be frightened? He dashed off, and Rose was left alone in the storm.

She was horribly frightened; but she would have died of fear sooner than call Robert back if he had a mind to leave her. She crept out of bed, wet and terrified and thoroughly miserable. It was the lightning that shook all her nerves.

"I'll light the lamp," she said. "Then it won't show the flashes so much."

But it was easier to light it than to keep it lighted. Wherever she set it, a drop would come splashing on the chimney, threatening to crack it.

"There's nothing to do but to sit up and hold an umbrella over it," she said, with a brave attempt at a laugh. She seated herself in the middle of the bed as the dryest place, took the lamp in her lap, and raised the umbrella over it. There she sat, shaking and miserable, till the storm passed away.

"There are times," said Rose emphatically, "when this western life is not altogether what it is cracked up to be."

CHAPTER IV

IN THE NEW HOME

AIRLY established now in her tiny home, Rose's housekeeping began in earnest. It was not altogether a success, though she worked very hard.

Mrs. Elbridge was a wonderful cook. She could take the most unlikely combination, put it between two crusts, bake it in her unhandy, little, elevated oven, and have it turn out a most delectable pie. She was quite as skilful with puddings. When coffee was lacking—as it often was in those days—she browned wheat with a little molasses poured over it, and from it made a beverage which was pronounced quite as good as the

al thing. Her soda biscuit were dreams of lightness and toothsomeness, though the tricks that the same could play in Rose's hands were astonishing. Mrs. Elbridge's meats were also famous. She could take the toughest portion and cook it so that it was deliciously tender and tasty; and, if all meat

were lacking, she could turn codfish or salt mackeral into something so good that no one desired the missing article. But Rose's cooking attempts were often the occasion of dismal failures.

She would have been glad to stand by the side of this notable housewife and learn openly from her; but a curious sort of pride would not allow her to do so, or, indeed, so much as ask a question. Instead, she resorted to what she considered a masterly strategem.

The window in her tiny house looked directly into Mrs. Elbridge's. Standing by it, Rose could see everything the pioneer's wife was doing at her cooking table. Hour after hour she stood and watched her. Then she turned to her own dry-goods-box table and and repeated the process. There were times when she succeeded reasonably well. She made a batch of mock mince pies of raisins and sugar and vinegar and crackers which Rob pronounced superior to the real article; but there were times when her failures were hidden away, if possible, or brought forward with much shame and mortification.

Luckily for Rose, there were not many things to cook. Pancakes she had learned to manage successfully on her journey. Biscuit were a source of great trouble to her. Mrs. Elbridge's were always light and white and delicious, and she made them without getting even the tips of her floured fingers stuck up with dough. But Rose, trying with all her might to do exactly as her neighbor did, never plunged her hands into the mass without getting fingers hopelessly stuck together; and the biscuits she turned out were yellow and soggy and streaked, in spite of her best efforts.

Bread was even more difficult than biscuit. It must of necessity be salt-rising, for there was not a bit of yeast to be had. A more ill-smelling, unmanageable compound than Rose's first batches never was seen. It was as hard to bake it as to make it; for all the wood was green, and it was almost impossible to make the fire hot. Morning, noon, and night the oven was kept full of wood drying; but still the fuel in the stove sizzled and sputtered and refused to burn.

Browning the coffee was another of her

troubles. It could not be bought browned and ground as it is to-day. It was purchased in pale, slate-colored kernels, which must be browned in the oven and laboriously ground with a hand mill. It was a difficult matter to do, and more than once she burned up a whole dollar's worth of coffee.

"It's the meanest job I ever saw," stormed Rose to the pictured girl behind the stove. "I watch it every minute for an hour and it won't brown at all; and then I turn away just for a second and it burns up."

If Rob had not scolded over that, he would have been more than mortal brother. It is bad enough to burn up coffee any time; but when all supplies have to be hauled in a lumber wagon from twelve to a hundred miles, it is a great deal worse. But it was not necessary to scold. Rose felt inexpressibly humiliated and miserable.

The only kind of meat that they could keep was salt pork, and however hard you try, there are not many ways of cooking this. Sometimes a deer was shot near the settlement, and then the settlers had venison. There were no potatoes that first summer

and no garden stuff. Beans could be obtained at Shanley's Grove, and they ate them three times a day. These and salt pork and milk gravy were their staples. At first there had not been even milk; but that spring a cow had been led across the prairie, and she was worth her weight in silver to the little settlement.

Robert grew sturdier every day in the fresh prairie air and devoured even Rose's failures with appetite; but Rose came to pine for something different.

"I'm tired of pork and beans and milk gravy. I want something that grows in a garden," she said; and when, in the bottom of a box, she came upon sundry packages of garden seeds that her careful mother had packed, she set her heart on planting them, late as it was.

"Oh, Rob, please spade me up a garden," she coaxed. "A very little one will do."

Robert was the kindest-hearted brother in the world; and he straightway took the spade and started out to do as his sister desired. But the unbroken prairie was harder to turn than he had dreamed. He might

quite as well have attempted to spade up a rubber door-mat. The tough roots of the wild grass were matted and twisted together in an impenetrable mass.

"You'll have to wait till next year, Rose," he said at last. "I can't make you one till the ground is broken with the breaking plow."

"But I want it now." Rose was almost crying.

Rob's heart was pierced. All day long he kept watching for a place where it would be possible to make a garden for Rose. At night he came in with his face beaming. Rose was beaming, too.

"I've thought of a place where we can make our garden," he said.

"Why, so have I."

"Where is it?"

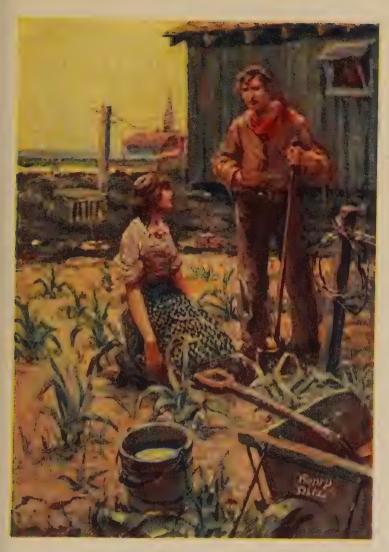
"Come and see."

She led him to a gopher mound some distance back of the house. Here the ground was as soft and light as heart could wish.

"See, it is all broken up for us," she said.

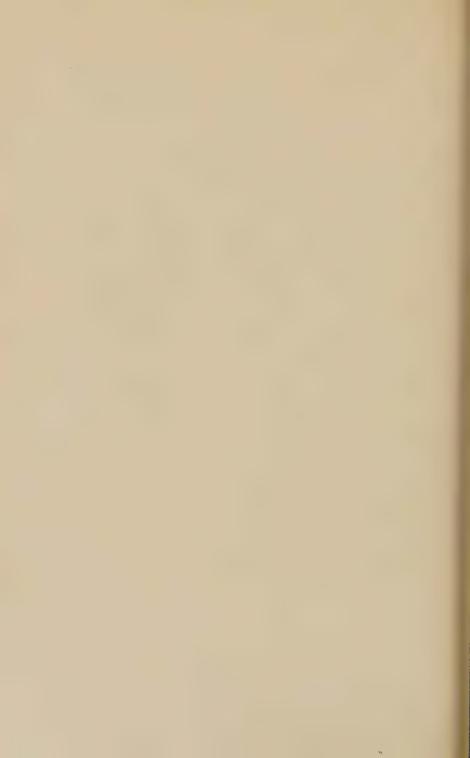
"Yes," said Rob. "That's just the place I thought of."

And to neither of them occurred the



Every day the two came out to look at their garden.

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thought that there might be disadvantages in planting a garden in a gopher mound.

Robert dug and spaded and hoed and raked. Rose planted and watered joyfully. Every day the two came out to look at their garden. The faithful little seeds did their best, and soon came up fresh and green. Rose and Robert took an interest in them such as a devoted father and mother feel in the growing of a child. At every meal, over their monotonous fare, they spoke of good things to come.

"How nice it will be to eat things that grew in our own garden!" sighed Rose.

Alas, she forgot that somebody else had a right to say the same thing. Not human creatures but cunning, little, striped somebodies with wee, little, bare paws like the tiniest of slender hands. These original little striped citizens of the garden felt that they had the first right to its productions. At least, they took it. One day when Rose and Robert came out to gloat over the green leaves, they found not a single leaf there. The cunning, little, striped thieves had taken everything.

They planted their garden again and yet again. They set traps to catch the gophers. They tried to drown them out. It was no use. They could not get rid of the little, striped, original inhabitants. As fast as their garden came up, the gophers took it.

"At least, we have learned one thing," said Rose, with a sigh over her lost lettuce and radishes. "We know now that a gopher mound is not a good place to plant a garden, although the ground may be nice and soft."

Robert was very busy now getting his wild land ready for cultivation the next year. The breaking plow was engaged and a good part of the land plowed up. Rose, to solace and occupy herself, turned to the adornment of the tiny house. The walls were not plastered but were covered with brown building paper to keep out the cold. Rose declared that this would make a lovely background, and with pictures cut from magazines she turned the house into a picture gallery. Great was Totty's delight in seeing it grow, and many a pleasant hour did Rose spend over it. The whole settlement was interested, and the fame of it spread far and wide.

Then, when that was finished, she began to make collections of prairie flowers. This became even a greater pleasure, for the prairie was like a garden. One day she counted fifty different kinds of blossoms on a single walk.

Still, in spite of every occupation she could invent, the days were lonely while Rob was at work. It was with a throb of joy that she heard him say one night at the dry-goods-box supper table:

"We're going to have some new settlers this week. Jack Benson's family have started. Jack went off to meet them this afternoon. They came by train as far as they could, and he hauls them the rest of the way on a load of lumber. I suppose they are in Shanley's Grove now."

"Oh, Rob, how glad, how glad I 'll be!"

Jack Benson was one of the friendliest of the workmen on the new court-house. He had decided to cast in his lot with the little settlement and had purchased land at the county-seat. When the court-house was finished, it was arranged that he should be deputy recorder and act for the real incumbent, who lived twenty miles away. He was making arrangements to bring his wife and two little girls to occupy the second of the county houses, the twin to Mr. Elbridge's, where Naylor stayed now with the county records and books. Rose was more than anxious for the coming of this young wife, who seemed from her husband's description little more than a girl herself.

"I wonder when we shall see her first," she said wistfully. "I wish — " but Robert was far too absorbed in weightier matters to consider so slight a thing as the coming of another woman to the settlement.

"They are going to have a baseball game at Shanley's Grove," he said, with visible importance. "The north side of the county is going to play against the south side. They wanted me to be shortstop—" he tried to look indifferent but failed utterly—"but I had to tell them 'no.' I can't take time for play. A man must work."

It was funny, but Rose did n't dare to laugh. She wanted more than she could tell to go to Shanley's Grove and get a first glimpse of Jack Benson's wife and children.

But she knew it was of no use to urge this. Instead, she prudently rose and went to one after another of the bags and boxes in her dry-goods-box cupboard.

"We have only half a sack of flour left," she commented. "And there's only a little sugar; and not many beans. It would n't be wise to be without supplies ahead. It might storm. I wonder if we had not better drive to Shanley's Grove to get them. I am almost sure the Elbridges need supplies, too. It would only be neighborly, Rob, for us to go for them."

"Well, we'll see. Maybe it would be a good thing," admitted Rob with seeming hesitation. Reluctantly as he spoke, Rose rather thought the case was won. He would n't miss that ball game, if any excuse could be found for going. Rose felt quite sure of that when he said reflectively, a few minutes later:

"Well, if we really must go to Shanley's Grove, I suppose I might as well play in the ball game."

A little later Mr. Elbridge came in.

"I have some business to do in Shanley's

Grove," he said, "I thought I'd look in and see if you needed anything in the way of supplies."

"Why, we are going ourselves. I was just starting to your house to see if you wanted

anything."

"Well," there was the well-known humorous twinkle in the eyes, though the face was very sober, "you need not stop work and take the trouble to go. I can bring you what you need."

"Well, the fact is—" hemmed Rob in rather embarrassed fashion, "the fact is, I have a little business to do there that I'm afraid nobody could tend to for me. But I thank you just the same."

Mr. Elbridge laughed. "I thought it might be so," he said. "Still, I used to play shortstop fairly well. But of course younger legs can run better. Harmony will be pretty empty to-morrow. Everybody is going to the game."

Rose's heart leaped for joy. She did n't know much about baseball, but an expedition was always welcome; and she was very desirous of seeing the new settlers as soon as possible.

Bright and early the next morning a procession of vehicles containing every inhabitant of Harmony set out for the little town by the grove—to get supplies, of course. The way led across two prairie river branches and sloughs innumerable, but, going all together, it was easy to pull each other out when they stuck. Getting stuck was growing to be a commonplace experience to Rose and Robert. They paid very little attention to it.

The birds were singing gayly, and the prairie was covered with shoestring flowers with foliage as dainty as ferns, and just beginning to shine with the pale, purple torches of the tall blazing stars. But as the sun rose higher, the wind rose, too, until it blew such a gale as is only felt on the treeless prairies. Then Rose envied Mrs. Elbridge's sunbonnet, for her city hat twisted around and tipped until it became the most uncomfortable headgear that could be imagined.

The way was enlivened by a race in which Naylor in his light buggy easily came off winner. Robert and Rose both looked at him admiringly. He had been a true friend, and they were glad of his victories.

Rose's rapidly developing, housewifely forethought had put up a lunch for her and Rob, but they were not allowed to eat it. As soon as they drove up to the first house, they were received with open arms, and the whole procession invited to share in the dinner of the household, quite regardless of numbers.

The little house was set on top of a hill, and all the winds of heaven seemed to circle around its four walls. Rose was a light little maiden, and her heroic efforts at cooking and housekeeping had not made her any plumper. As she jumped down from the high wagon-seat, the wind caught her and whirled her over and over. Down she went, down the hill, rolling over and over like a big tumbleweed. She was exceedingly mortified. Everybody laughed, and her cheeks burned hotly. But Rob picked her up and brushed off the dirt, and the ruddy-haired treasurer comforted her greatly with his reassuring words.

"That's nothing," he said. "I was blown over like that myself once, but no wind could knock me over now. You'll soon be able to stand against the Iowa winds, if you grow like the rest of the Iowa people. Is n't it a thing to be proud of to live in a State with winds like that?"

A wagon-load of lumber was drawn up in front of the door, and from within the little house came a fretful wailing.

"The new settlers for your place," said the hospitable host. "They got here last night. Benson had to go back to see about some more luggage. His wife and two children are in the house. And they are pretty much tired out, too. Baby's been yelling all day, and the woman has a headache."

Rose looked at the new arrivals eagerly, her heart going out to them at once, for she remembered the weariness of her own journey. The woman's face was pretty and girlish, but drawn and puckered with pain. The ride in the sun had brought on a blinding headache. The baby was screaming lustily and resisting all her efforts to soothe it. From one end to the other of the little house trotted a tiny, golden-haired girl asking continual questions that nobody had time to answer.

Like a magnetic needle to the pole, Rose's arms stretched themselves out for the crying

baby. All her bashfulness was quite forgotten in this time of need.

"Let me take care of her," she said to the pale young mother. "Let me take the baby, and you lie down and sleep off your headache."

The mother handed over the child with very evident relief, for she could hardly hold her head up. Rose carried the baby into the little lean-to kitchen, that its noise might not disturb the mother, but she could not quiet it.

The kindly hostess stopped her cooking to peer a moment into the little, puckered, baby face.

"Like enough it's hungry," she said. "Do you think you could feed it? I'll warm some milk and sugar and water, and you can feed it with a spoon."

It was a doubtful project for an untried hand, but Rose succeeded in a way that thrilled her soul with pride. It seemed as if the baby had been hungry. Now that it was fed, it curled itself up to sleep quite contentedly on Rose's lap.

How round and soft the little body was!

Rose's soul went out to it as it never had to child before. She would not even put her down at dinner-time lest she should break the charm. She ate with the baby in her lap. She even announced — to Robert's unqualified disgust — that she would stay at home with the sick mother and the children, instead of going to the ball game.

There was polite protest; but the ball game was the greatest event of the summer; and if Rose stayed, all the others could go. So her offer was gladly accepted, and guests and household, having first washed and wiped stacks of dishes in a wonderfully short time, set out for the improvised ball ground, leaving Rose alone with the sleeping mother and two children, also asleep.

How strangely quiet and lonesome the little house on the hill seemed after the bustle of departure! How very noisy the prairie wind suddenly became! The clattering and banging sounded eerie in the loneliness. A cloud had come over the sun. Even in the daylight the fitful gusts seemed like invisible spirits trying to get in. Invisible? No. It seemed to imaginative Rose that she could fairly see

their woful faces and streaming hair. She suddenly felt very much alone.

"I believe I'd just as lief the baby would wake up and cry again," she said to herself. But when her wish was granted, she wished it ungranted. Baby Dillie's crying was no small thing. Rose wanted the mother to rest. Perhaps she could feed the baby again and quiet her as she had done before. She had learned where the milk was kept in the partially dug cellar beneath the house. With spoon and cup in hand, she started down the cellar stairs to find that somebody had gone down before her. It was little Betty, the small questioner, who had perceived here a chance for investigation, and aroused noiselessly from her nap to pursue it. By the simple expedient of sitting on one step while she found a footing with her short legs on the step below, she had managed to work her way down the outside stairs with no damage save adding considerable dirt to her clothing. Now she was squatting on the floor in the farthest corner, clapping her hands in ecstasy at the sight of some object there, an object which turned Rose's face ashy in an instant.

"See! See!" gurgled the little one joyously. "Betty's found a nice snake!"

Another snake! Rose's heart seemed to stop with terror. She could hardly make her feet go forward. Coiled up on the floor in front of the child was a veritable monster snake, dimly seen in the semi-darkness of the unlighted cellar. The cup and spoon dropped to the floor as Rose sprang forward, snatched little Betty, and dashed up the cellar stairs as if all the snakes in the world were after her. She slammed down the cellar door and put a great stone on top of it.

"Now the snake can't get away, and the men folks will kill it when they come," she said tremblingly.

But tormenting fears harassed her. Perhaps the snake would get away. Perhaps it would creep up through some hole in the floor. It ought to be killed at once.

"If I can kill one snake, I can kill another," she said firmly, though her whole body was quivering. She handed the indignant Betty to her roused mother's care, and went out to the woodpile to get the ax. Then she opened the door and started down the cellar stairs again.

"Don't go! Oh, don't go!" screamed the frightened young mother, clutching at her skirts wildly. "You'll be killed!"

But Rose slipped bravely away from the detaining grasp. Down, down she went with fearful steps into the darkness.

The snake was coiled just as it had been before. It seemed not to have moved at all. Very cautiously and fearfully, Rose crept forward with the upraised ax. It did not stir.

Thump! The ax came down heavily. No motion from the snake. Thump! Thump! Thump! Thump! Now it must be dead. The head was clearly severed from the body.

Trembling but determined, Rose bent over it, bound to see that the destruction was complete. Then she laughed. She put out her hand and boldly lifted the severed head in spite of the mother's screams of terror.

"It's no snake at all! It's only a great coil of rope! Oh, dear, how they will all laugh at me!"

"They sha'n't," cried the young mother, after much persuasion had at last induced her to verify Rose's statement. "You were

just as brave as if you had killed a real snake, and I'll tell them so."

"Oh, no, don't," begged Rose. "Don't tell them anything. I would n't have them know anything about it for the world."

CHAPTER V

PASSING DAYS

"DON'T tell," whispered Rose again, as the approaching sounds made it evident that the crowd who had been at the baseball game were coming back. "I don't want any of them to find out. They'll never get over teasing me if they do."

She need not have been troubled. Both players and spectators were too full of the game to notice anything else. Rob had quite distinguished himself as shortstop, and found it hard to bring himself down to what he felt was becoming humility. But the honors were not his alone. Naylor, the county treasurer, had saved the day for his side of the county by a phenomenal run, but he was refreshingly modest about it.

"It was just my long legs and Rob's good batting," he said, with a friendly touch on Rob's shoulder. The boy felt as pleased as if he had received a knight's accolade. He was getting up a great admiration for the red-haired treasurer.

A bountiful supper was prepared in a surprisingly short space of time and merrily Then the little procession started back across the tall, prairie grass. The wind had died down; the sky had cleared; and the evening was beautiful.

"Now is the time to be afraid," said Mr. Elbridge to Rose in his hesitant, earnest way of speech that sounded so much more impressive than quick talking.

"What is it?" cried Rose in alarm. "Is it wolves?"

"No, something worse than wolves. Wolves will let you alone at this season."

"Is it Indians?" Rose turned white. Mr. Elbridge hastened to reassure her.

"No, nothing like that."

"Is it horse-thieves?" For rumors of dire import had reached their ears that day.

"No, it's mosquitoes. But I miss my guess if you do not decide before this ride is over that they are worse than wolves or Indians or horse-thieves."

The pretty flush came back to Rose's cheek. She was used to mosquitoes. There were plenty of them in Harmony. Every night she and Rob built a smudge in front of their little house to keep them away. She thought she knew the worst of mosquitoes.

But she was not used to them in any such quantity as this. They rose up in clouds from the long swamp grass. The horses' necks and flanks were fairly black with them. The travelers gathered long weeds and stuck them in the harness and wielded them vigorously around their faces and hands, but even with the utmost pains they were bitten constantly.

"Is n't there any way to keep them off?" cried Rose.

"No way but to wrap from head to foot in something thick," answered Mrs. Elbridge, as she swathed sleepy little Totty in the green plaid blanket shawl that had once made the partition to Rose's room.

"Rob," said Rose, as she slapped and pounded, "don't you sometimes wish our father had bought our land where there were not quite so many swamps?"

"No, indeed," answered Rob, loyally, with a mighty slap. "This is the best section of country in the United States."

It was good to settle down on the shingle spring bed, with the smoke of the smudge, that Robert had made before he unhitched the horses, blowing in at the open door and windows, and a protecting sheet wrapped around one's head.

"There's — no — place — like — home," murmured Rose, as her head sank down on the pillow; and the last word trailed off into a blissful, sleepy sigh. How easy it was to drop off to sleep in this sweet-breezed, prairie country. Some people say the very name "Iowa" means "Sleepy Eye." Rose's dreams were all of the new family, and many were the plans she laid for the time when they should arrive.

Every one united in carrying these plans out, for the arrival of new settlers was a matter of great importance. It had been arranged that their entertainers in Shanley's Grove were to escort the Bensons to Harmony and pay back the visit of the ball game, and great were the preparations to entertain them.

"Rob," said Rose, "I've promised to get the prairie chickens for the big dinner."

Rob gave a low whistle of amazement.

"Will you shoot them?" he asked.

"No, of course not. You will shoot them for me. But I will get them together for you. I know how! You know our haystack out there?"

Indeed, Robert had reason to know it. Had n't he cut the hay himself, and laboriously stacked it?

"Well, the other day Totty and I took some cookies out there to eat. And the prairie chickens were just wild to pick up the crumbs we dropped. They would almost fly down while we were standing there. If we'd scatter some grain there and hide in the stack, we could bring down a dozen at a shot."

"Will you shoot them?" asked Rob again. "No, you know I can't bear to. I think maybe I could, but I — I don't want to. I don't want them to be killed at all. But they have to be, because they are all the meat we can get; and I can't cook so well as Mrs. Elbridge, and I want to do my share. You come and shoot them for me, won't you, Rob?"

Rob did n't like to do it, himself. The great, long-legged fellow was tender-hearted to a fault. He would rather see the birds get away than hit them, but meat must be obtained for the dinner; so very early one bright morning, a boy with a gun and a girl with a grain-sack started out over the dewy prairie. To the haystack they went, scattered the grain beside it, and hid themselves.

"Whirr! Whirr! Whirr!" They had not fairly concealed themselves before the flock came dropping down. Dozens and dozens of the soft, bright-eyed, brown-speckled things, as confiding as barnyard chickens. They flew down to the feast so guilefully provided and picked up the kernels of wheat as unsuspiciously as their cousins, the biddies, would have done.

"Don't shoot! It's a shame," whispered Rose, ready to repudiate her plan in the instant of its success. Even practical Rob, with his finger on the trigger, hesitated. But it was not a time to be ruled by feeling. The grain was too valuable to be wasted. Bang went the gun, and one shot laid a surprising number of birds low. Then the flock whirled

away; but in a little while they were back, picking up the grain again. A second shot brought down as many as the first. A third had the same result.

"Oh, Rob, that is enough!" cried Rose. "I can't bear to kill any more, when they come up to us so. Let us take these and go home."

Great were the exclamations over the number of birds taken, and much praise was given to Rose's clever scheme. The plan was often followed in the days that came after, and it was a long time before the prairie chickens grew too wild to pick up the grain the settlers scattered. Hidden inside their very barns, they killed prairie chickens by the score. So numerous were they, that they did not attempt to use all the meat, but stripped off the breasts and dried them like dried beef. and never was there meat more delicious than these dried prairie chicken breasts. Rose never was quite happy that the plan was hers, however. A bright-eyed, live prairie chicken seemed worth more to her than a dozen dead ones, yet the settlement would have fared ill without this addition to their scanty larder.

The feast was cooked to a turn by Mrs. Elbridge, with Rose's anxious help. The tiny houses in the middle of the great prairie were scrubbed and swept and dusted to the very last degree of cleanliness. With eager eyes Rose scanned the horizon for the approach of the new friends, and could hardly wait till they came. Yet, when they did come, an overpowering shyness took possession of her. She slipped in behind the stove, too bashful to say a word. Still, somehow, the baby was transferred from the tired mother's arms to hers, and from that very moment tiny Miss Dillie considered Rose her especial property.

Such a fat, peachy-cheeked baby as she was, with big, brown eyes brimming over with crystal tears one moment and sparkling with baby glee the next! Such a darling baby when she laughed! Such a strenuous baby when she cried! She was usually goodnatured, but when she wanted anything she wanted it with all her heart. Betty, the older child, was a dainty picture of child loveliness with golden curls, a color like a wax doll's, and a tongue that never ceased

from questioning; but she never won Rose's heart like roly-poly baby Dillie.

In a few days it seemed as if they had been there always. Rose was justly proud of her skill in managing the baby and kept the children at the house hours at a time, answering with patience Betty's perpetual "Why for?" and never wearying of caring for little Dillie.

It was a pleasant fall, and it was made still pleasanter to Rose when, in the golden days of September, a cousin of the Elbridges', a young girl of her own age, came to visit the settlement.

She was a bouncing, red-cheeked girl, named Lydia Smith, who weighed almost twice as much as slender Rose and was the very embodiment of good nature and pioneer efficiency. She had been brought up on the prairie, and her capable, brown hands were skilful to milk cows, drive horses, hold plows, and a dozen things more that Rose had never thought of trying. She was quick to see the possibilities of having a good time everywhere, had not the least atom of nervousness or bashfulness, and was n't afraid of anything.

A better companion could scarcely have been found for shy, over-sensitive Rose, and Lydia's visit in Harmony did the youngest housekeeper a world of good.

"Why don't you go horseback riding?" said Lydia one day. "Those horses are yours as much as Rob's, and you could have no end of fun riding over the prairie."

"Oh, I could n't!" cried Rose, aghast at the very idea. "I have n't any side-saddle."

"Side-saddle!" Lydia's laugh would have been unpleasantly mocking if it had n't been so good-natured. "Only tenderfeet have to have any saddle at all. But I'll make you one. Get me a grain-sack, and I'll have you a saddle, fast enough."

She stuffed the grain-sack with prairie hay. Then she fastened it on Templar's back with a surcingle. Disdaining any kind of a saddle at all for herself, she climbed up on a box and mounted on Peter.

"Lead Templar up to the box and get on him," she called in a tone loud enough to bring out the whole settlement. "You must learn to ride horseback."

"Oh, no!" cried Rose, dreadfully afraid.

But how could she draw back with all those eyes upon her. The men politely came out to help and, with Rob to boost and Naylor to hold the horse, Rose did manage, after several mortifying efforts, to mount.

"Come on," called Lydia gayly, and her vigorous clucking started up Templar as well as his mate. Peter bounced away at a jolting trot. Lydia stuck on like a burr, but the first jolt sent Rose off on the soft, prairie grass.

"Come on! Come on!" called Lydia. "Get on his back again and come on." A friendly watcher had caught Templar's rein and was leading him back to her.

"Oh, I can't! I dare n't! I don't want to get on his back again! I know I shall just fall off!" cried Rose miserably, in an agony of mortification. But Rob did not mean to have his sister give up anything. He tossed her up on Templar's back again, quite against her will, and thrust the reins into her trembling hand.

"Go on, Susan B! Don't be a coward!" he said. But Naylor, with a glance at the girl's face, stepped beside the horse and took the leading strap.

"I'll guide your horse," he said. "All you need to do is to attend to the sticking on."

It was a harder thing for the timid girl to do than he, used to horses as he was, could realize. Rose had never been on a horse's back before, and a grain-sack is neither a secure nor a comfortable saddle for a beginner. She gave a piteous glance at the assembly before the door. Oh, why would they all come out to see her ride?

"Stick on! You're doing finely," said Naylor's encouraging voice. She perched unsteadily on the back of the tall, rawboned horse, looking not unlike a fly on the edge of a bowl. She was a fly, without wings, however; and so frightened a fly never perched anywhere

"You won't give up! You're not that kind," said Naylor. Rose straightened up and looked more confident.

She half expected to be killed when at last she summoned all her courage and started alone over the prairie after Lydia. A daring leader was Lydia, who knew no fear and saw no need for consideration. She pelted over the untracked grass in utter recklessness. Rose clung convulsively to the surcingle with one hand and the bridle rein with the other, shut her eyes as a way of avoiding the appearance of danger, and let Templar follow. She might die, but she would not back out now. Greatly to her surprise she did not die, and no accident befell her. She came back safely, and no injury was done except a dreadful stiffness which laid hold of her the next morning.

Every muscle seemed to have a separate ache. But Lydia assured her that the only way to get rid of the stiffness and lameness that horse-back riding made was to go horse-back riding some more. It took heroic determination at first, but she went; and soon she came to enjoy their rides over the prairie, which had never been more beautiful. Rose's shyness and loneliness vanished together under the geniality of this other girl's abounding good humor. Every day was marked by a festivity, for the whole settlement exerted itself to please this guest, who was so easily pleased. One happy, sunny day they drove to Purlington's Woods, eighteen miles to the

north, to gather wild crab-apples and plums. Very hard and sour and green were the crab-apples, and very small and bitter the plums; but they were the only fruit to be obtained in the region and correspondingly precious.

They went hunting, too, and Rose was astonished to see that Lydia enjoyed it, fired a gun as well as a man, and delighted in the number of birds she could bring down. Rose herself shivered every time a gun went off and would n't have touched one for anything.

"I wish I were like her," she said rather ruefully, as she watched Lydia laughing and joking with one and another of the party, to the evident enjoyment of all. "She's the kind of a girl for this country. I don't know how to do things and I'm not good company."

"You are good company enough for me when you don't get blue," said Rob loyally. "Keep a stiff upper lip and you're all right."

It did n't sound like praise, but Rose felt that it was, and her face brightened. She resolved that, come what would, she should keep a stiff upper lip and be good company. "And I am learning to do things," she thought happily. "I make lots better bread than I did at first, and my biscuits are hardly ever yellow any more, and I can wash, too, without getting all the skin rubbed off from my knuckles. I'm learning. Some day I'll be worth just as much as Lydia to the folks around."

The last day of the young guest's stay was one of those beautiful, golden days of September.

"Let's ride to Indian Island," said Lydia, and Rose assented gladly. The sun came down with a friendly warmth across their faces. The prairie lay in wide, yellowing expanse, checkered over by the drifting shadows. In the sky above them a flock of wild geese was flying towards the south, and the air was full of their "honk, honk."

"When the ducks and geese fly south, it's a sign it's going to be cold," said Lydia, squinting up into the sky to measure a passing flock.

"Oh, it can't be going to turn cold yet. It's only September; and feel how beautifully warm the air is."

"That's no sign; or rather it is a sign. This is just the kind of a day to be a weather-breeder."

Rose was holding her rein loosely and looking about, thinking more of the loveliness that lay around her than of her horse. Suddenly a covey of prairie chickens whirled up from the long grass at Templar's feet. The startled horse bolted. Rose clutched the reins and pulled frantically, but she could not stop him.

"Oh, Lydia, he's running away!" she cried in dismay.

"Turn him into the slough. That will stop him," shouted practical Lydia. Rose obediently turned Templar's course toward the ever-adjacent swamp. His long legs sank in deep and he very soon came to a standstill.

"There's no use in letting a horse get away from you," said Lydia didactically, as she came up. "In summer, turn him into a slough, in winter, into a snowbank. He can't run far then."

Away they went again, Rose taking this latest lesson in horsemanship to memory.

But she had not yet learned all the lessons she needed. The next minute her heedless eyes allowed Templar to step into a half concealed gopher hole. Down went his front quarters, and over his head went Rose. The bridle slipped out of her hand, and she was left rolling ignominiously in the muddy grass. With no rider to check him, the horse decided to bolt again. This time he was more successful. Away dashed Lydia after him on Peter, intent on catching the dangling rein.

But Templar refused to be caught and, lightened of his load, skimmed easily over the swampy place. Lydia's weight was considerable, and the horse that carried her sank in far more deeply. It was one of those sloughs that is filled with rounded hummocks of turf that rise from the bottom almost like round stones. Peter's forefeet planted themselves firmly on a hummock, but his hind feet dropped down in the mud. He gave his head a toss that snatched the reins from Lydia's hand. There was no saddle-horn to cling to. Suddenly and most provokingly, Lydia, the champion girl rider

of the region, slipped down over her horse's tail into the mud.

"Whoa, Peter, whoa!" she cried. But Peter, relieved of his load, had no mind to whoa. The two horses drew together and galloped away as if it were the best of jokes, and the girls were left on the prairie five miles from home.

At first it seemed rather funny. They laughed, as girls will, till the prairie rang, and started merrily on their long walk home. Then the sun sank into a bank of clouds, and a chilling wind began to blow from the northwest.

"It was a weather-breeder, you see," said Lydia, shivering in her wet and muddy garments.

Rose caught her breath in dismay. "And it is getting dark! And we are miles away from home. See that big black cloud coming up! We must go faster."

"Yes," said Lydia. "Let's run."

Hand in hand they scurried before the wind. But the dark came with awesome speed, and there were gopher holes and tangled grass to avoid. By mutual and si-

lent consent, their pace grew slower and slower until it subsided into a walk. Soon even to walk grew difficult.

One by one the stars had come out above their heads, but not for long. They were rapidly swallowed up by the rising clouds. A pale, little, new moon hung for a moment in the west, but it too was devoured by the blackness.

Suddenly — or did it seem sudden because they had not been noticing it before? — the prairie which had seemed so lonesomely still was filled with yet more lonesome sound. Crickets and grasshoppers began their melancholy chirp; and from the sloughs in every direction it was answered by the indescribable, gruff piping of the frogs.

It was dismal music in the falling darkness, and even the stolid Lydia was disturbed by it. Rose, more sensitive, felt the evening sadness in every nerve and fiber. But she strove bravely to rise above the occasion and merit Rob's approval.

"I wonder where our horses are by this time," she said with as much lightness of tone as she could muster.

"Eating, probably," answered Lydia, in whom a healthy appetite was stirring. "I wish I were a horse so that I could eat grass."

"There would be plenty of it to eat."
Rose actually managed to give a little giggle,
although her throat was aching with unshed
tears. "It is about all there is plenty of on
these prairies."

"Plenty of water — in the sloughs."

"Oh, don't mention it. We have hard enough time to keep out of them. Come on."

Again they quickened their pace, but again it grew slower. It was too dark to go fast and it was getting too dark even to know where to go. Their guide as to direction had been the dome and slender spire of the court-house, outlined against the pale eastern sky. But now the cloud covered the east, and the dome was no longer visible. They had ridden out across the unbroken prairie, and there was n't a sign of a road. They stumbled on doggedly till Lydia said: "My feet are getting wet."

"So are mine. I thought we would be past the wet place in a little while, but they 're

getting wetter. We must be walking right into a slough."

"Let's walk out, then." But that was easier said than done. They were a long time groping to dry land.

"Oh, I'm so tired. I wish I could lie down and sleep a while."

"Oh, we must n't. We are all wet and if we stopped moving we should catch our deaths of cold."

Back and forth, back and forth, they went, not daring to go ahead when they did not know which way they were headed, and fearful of the sloughs all around them. Back and forth, back and forth, stumbling, helping each other up, laughing, crying, calling, listening. Back and forth, back and forth, with the keen north wind chilling them to the bone. Would it last forever?

"I — did n't — think — any — night — could — be — half — so — long," murmured poor Rose, making an heroic effort to speak brightly, but in danger of falling asleep over each word. "Don't — you — suppose — it's most — morning?"

"Yes, it must be," assented Lydia. "But

why don't the people at the settlement come after us? I should think somebody ought to."

"Rob will," said Rose confidently. "He will come, I know."

Back and forth, back and forth they stumbled. Then Lydia dropped. She had fairly fallen asleep upon her feet. Rose was the only waking soul in all the wide, dark prairie. The terror of it drove away the drowsiness for her.

"Lydia, Lydia, wake up! You must n't lie on the ground here. You 'll catch cold."

She made heroic efforts to shake her heavy companion into wakefulness. But all the answer she got was: "Oh, let me alone! It is n't time to get up yet." By main strength she pulled her up at last, and walked her back and forth, fast asleep. When it seemed as if she could not stand it a minute longer, a light glimmered on the far-away horizon.

"Lydia, wake up and help me shout!" cried Rose so earnestly that even Lydia's sleepy ear was reached. "Somebody is hunting for us."

It was a long, sleepy shout, and the wind carried it away from the searcher. The light

grew dimmer, smaller. Oh, could he go away? They called again and again at the tops of their voices.

"Hel-lo-oo!" Was there ever sound so sweet before? The light grew brighter and was swung about reassuringly. The searcher was coming toward them, but it took a long time for him to make his way around the swamp. The two girls stood on the very edge of it, screaming and shouting frantically.

"Rose, oh, Rose! Are you there?"
"Yes, Rob, yes. Here! Here!"

He was coming toward them as fast as his long legs could go. He had brought a wrap for each, and food in a tin pail, and everything that could be carried for the comfort of two very uncomfortable girls. Oh, Rob! Dear old Rob! There was nobody like him. In blissful content, with her hand in his, Rose forgot all that had worried her.

"What time is it, Rob? It is surely almost morning."

But Lydia remembered.

Rob drew out the big silver watch that was the pride of his heart and held it up to the light of the lantern.

"Ten o'clock," he said. "It's lucky I found you so soon, for the night is going to be cold."

So soon! The girls could hardly believe the testimony of the watch. Their wandering had seemed night-long.

"If two hours can be as long as this, I am sure a whole night would be endless ages," said Rose.

CHAPTER VI

PRAIRIE HAPPENINGS

were not destined to have a peaceful night. They elected to sleep
together in the Elbridge home, which had
now been divided into two rooms by a wooden
partition, and for once they dropped to sleep
without talking. But the wind kept rising
till it blew a gale. It banged the wash-boiler
and dishpan, hung outside the house, till a
whole band could n't have made more noise.
It clattered the shingles and loose boards. It
rattled everything that could be rattled. It
moaned around the eaves in a most weird
and desolate way. The little house on the
prairie fairly quivered under its buffetings.

"Lydia," whispered Rose, aroused from her slumbers, "Lydia, I'm afraid the house is going to blow down." But Lydia's only answer was a snore. She did n't do such foolish things as wake up and worry in the night. So Rose reasoned herself out of her fear, and settled down again, breathing a drowsy little prayer of thankfulness that they were not still shivering out on the prairie instead of safe and snug in a warm bed. In the middle of it, came a tremendous crash. There was a battering on the roof as if a host were trying to break through. Rose sprang bolt upright in bed. Could the Indians be upon them?

"Lydia, oh, Lydia, wake up! What is that noise?"

Lydia was awake now. Only the dead could rest undisturbed through such a clatter. But she was not frightened.

"Chimney's blowing down," she said practically. "Don't be a goose, Rose. But perhaps we had better get up, for it's right over our bed." As she spoke, something heavy fell uncomfortably near. They hastily groped their way out of bed and felt around in the dark for their clothes. All the while Rose had a feeling of snow falling upon her. Again and again she lifted her hand to brush it off.

Then came a fiercer clatter and a series of thuds. Something heavy dropped down on the bed where they had been lying. Rose screamed and even Lydia jumped. But it was only the stovepipe falling down. A light shone through the cracks of the partition, and Mr. Elbridge's voice said: "Girls, the wind has blown the chimney down, and I want to come in and see what can be done about it." In he came, followed by Rob. When they saw the girls, they began to laugh. They laughed more and more. Rob fairly howled with merriment, and Mr. Elbridge shook until he had to set down the lamp he held, lest it should fall.

"What is it?" gasped Rose. She saw nothing funny.

"Look at each other and you'll know," said Rob. The girls looked and knew. The mystery of the falling flakes was no longer a mystery; they were soot. It had fallen from the damaged chimney in clouds, and every time the girls had raised their hands to brush it off, they had made a black mark across their faces. Their clothes were black; their hands were black; their bare feet fairly shone with blackness as though they had been polished.

"Ho, ho," shouted Rob. "Who'd ever dream that they could be white girls?"

It was very funny to Rob, but it was not funny to the girls, for the scrubbing that followed was anything but a joke. The whole room was covered with soot, and everything the girls had in it was black. It was with difficulty that Lydia got cleaned up enough to go home on the morrow, as she had planned. Mr. Elbridge took her, and Rob and Jack Benson followed in another lumber wagon, for they must bring back supplies.

Rob would not come back for a day or two, and Rose did not know what to do with herself. Most of the time she kept the children in her little house for company. There she established them the next sunny afternoon, when the cold spell had once more yielded to the pleasant fall weather.

"You'll have to keep your eyes on them; they're full of mischief to-day," said the little mother, as she gave her two into Rose's charge and happily settled down to sewing.

"Oh, they are always good with me," answered Rose a little too proudly. Pride must have a fall.

It was easy for her to entertain them, for she had that magic that seems to please children whatever is done. She spread down a shawl and placed fat little Dillie in the middle of it with a string of spools. She would not have stayed there a minute without crying for any other person in the settlement, but for Rose she settled down in adorable content.

Betty and Totty were set to playing store just outside the door. The counter was a piece of board, held up by two bricks from the court-house. The stock in trade consisted of broken dishes and scarlet rose-hips. The money was made from the omnipresent petals of the prairie sunflower. A fascinating yellow coin it was, that could be heaped high enough to satisfy the greediest miser. Rose saw the three happy, and then settled down in blissful content with a book.

She had read the book through many times, but anything in print held a spell for Rose, and before long she became so absorbed that she forgot everything else. She read on and on, oblivious, while the minutes slipped away like winged things. A broad red beam

of lowering sunlight, falling directly across her page, roused her. She started up guiltily and went out to look for the children.

The sunflower money was heaped up in millionaire abundance. The stock in trade was still set out upon the counter. The red shawl lay where she had placed it, with a cunning little hollow in the center, where the round little body had been; but where were the children?

"They have gone home, but I don't see how they got Dillie there," she said to herself. She ran with all speed to her neighbor's door. There sat Betty and Totty playing together with the blocks, but baby Dillie was not in sight.

"Did you bring the baby in, Mrs Benson?"
Rose tried to speak naturally, but in spite
of herself her voice sounded queer. The
mother looked up in alarm.

"Why, no; Totty and Betty came in and said the baby was asleep. Where is she?"

"I can't find her. I got to reading," — how hard it was to say — "I forgot all about everything, and when I looked up the children were gone."

Scissors and cloth and patterns dropped to the floor, and the mother started up with a frightened face.

"Where could she have gone? She can't walk. Could she creep away? She can't be far. Maybe Mrs. Elbridge took her."

But Mrs. Elbridge had not seen the baby that afternoon. They searched through the three houses; they searched the dooryards and barns; they went from top to bottom of the new court-house - the workmen all stopping work to join in the search — though how creeping baby Dillie could be anywhere except, possibly, on the first floor, was hard to imagine. Then they all went back again and searched anew every nook and crevice of the settlement. They looked in every possible and impossible place. They pulled out all the drawers and peeped into all the ovens. They uncovered the shallow, newly dug well and peered with beating hearts into its depths, but no little pink figure was there.

"She must have gone off on the prairie."

"Oh, how could she? A baby who can't walk alone!"

"She can creep. And she's bound to do what she sets out to do."

"Oh, if Jack were only here!" moaned Mrs. Benson.

"If Rob were only here!" wailed Rose.

"If only Mr. Elbridge were here!" Mrs. Elbridge's very look told eloquently how utterly inadequate she considered any other man in comparison with her husband.

They searched over the prairie so far that it seemed impossible that the baby could get there, but still there was no trace of her. The mother and Rose were nearly distracted with grief and remorse. It was then that the workman in the faded out blue blouse, whom Rob called the Calamity Howler, began, very inconsiderately, to talk about Indians. They passed through the county very often, he said. There was an old Indian trail across it from north to south that had once been one of their main traveled ways. There might still be some about. They stepped so softly on their moccasined feet that no one could hear them. If one of them had carried off the child -

"Oh, let up on that!" thundered Naylor.

"One of them did n't. If there had been any Indians around, somebody would have known it. That baby has just crept off on the prairie, and she could n't have gone far. We'll find her before sunset. But just to be certain" — and he glanced reassuringly at the trembling mother — "Johnson, you can go north on the old trail, and Brown to the south. The rest of us will hunt over the prairie about here."

"We have hunted and we have n't found her." Naylor's look was enough to silence any other man, but the Calamity Howler was dense.

"We have n't looked in the right way to find a little thing like that. The tall grass would hide her anywhere. We must take ropes and stretch them out between us and drag them across it all over. We're sure to find her in that way."

"Yes, but you may find her drowned in the slough." Even the irrepressible Calamity Howler had the grace to say it softly so that the mother could not hear. But Rose heard and shuddered

They parcelled out the prairie into divi-

sions, and over it, two by two, they went, each couple dragging a long rope between them and feeling over every foot of the ground. But the sunset came, and they had not found her. Swiftly — oh, with what pitiless swiftness — the darkness settled down. Where was baby Dillie, so tender and small? What dreadful thing might not have happened to her — wolves — Indians — snakes — the swamp — oh, it was unbearable!

"And it is all my fault," sobbed Rose, as with trembling hands she brought out lanterns, lamps, candles, anything that would make a light for the searchers. They had sent her back to the house in the gathering darkness to take care of Totty and Betty, for the mothers could not bear to stop their seeking. Rose went back miserably, feeling that she was altogether to blame. The searchers had gone a long distance from the house now: Rose could not even hear their voices as she listened sorrowfully while she put Totty and Betty to sleep in the same bed. Oh, if she could only hold baby Dillie in her arms and sing her to sleep! How awfully quiet everything was! If she could only

hear baby Dillie's naughtiest "mad" cry! But there was no sound except the breathing of the sleeping children and the lonesome frogs and crickets.

Yes, there was a sound of wheels on the soft prairie grass. She heard it as she went to the door to watch for the twentieth time the distant lanterns of the searchers. Could it be the baby's father returning? Oh, what sorrow he was coming to! Rose must go and tell him, so that he could at once join in the search.

But this was no outfit that she had ever seen before; even in the dim twilight she could distinguish that. It was a light, democrat wagon, and in it sat two strangers. They were hunters, as she could tell from their guns. Hunters from the east often came out to the prairies in the prairie chicken season. One of them touched his hat and inquired in the most matter-of-fact tone

"Can you tell me, please, whether any one around here has missed a baby?"

Could she tell him! Rose lifted up her arms with an inarticulate cry. She could not speak, but, even in the semi-darkness, her

face and attitude spoke for her. Into the upstretched arms he put a bundle; and the bundle was Dillie.

A queer looking Dillie indeed, as Rose discovered when she hastened to the light. She was wrapped warmly in a big. man's hunting coat. Her face was plastered with mud; her mouth sticky and stained with something else - meat, or sugar, or candy. Her little gown was black from top to bottom and so were her hands. But she looked as happy as she was dirty. She was peacefully sleeping when Rose took her; but, with the movement, the big, brown eyes opened, shining as only Dillie's eyes could shine, and the baby tongue began to babble indistinguishably but with complete joyousness. To Dillie getting lost on the prairie was clearly a delightful diversion.

"We found her in the tall grass," said the hunter. "She was just cuddling down to go to sleep. I saw the motion of the grass and thought it was a covey of prairie chickens. I was going to shoot" — Rose shuddered — "but something made me go to see, and there she was. Two minutes later and there

would have been nothing to show that she was there."

"But why did n't you bring ber home the minute you found her?" asked Naylor sternly, when, the searching party having been summoned, he heard the story. "Did n't you care how the mother would feel?"

The hunter looked uncomfortable, as indeed he should have felt. He was young—they saw it now—and could hardly be expected to enter into the feelings of mothers of lost babies.

"Well, I had to hunt up the other man and get in the wagon; he had gone on the other way, and I was afoot. And then we had to feed the baby from our lunch; it was crying. And then it went to sleep, and we bundled it up and put it in the bottom of the wagon, and we did n't just think. The hunting was so good. Never shot so many birds in an afternoon in my life. Wanted to make the biggest story I could of it."

It was, after a fashion, an apology. Rose's indignation flared up. It was hard to forgive the needless hours of suffering and anxiety. But then she remembered that the

baby had been lost through her own neglect. What did it matter now that Dillie was safe? From that day she scarcely would let the child out of her sight.

The summer flew away as if on wings, and before any one could fairly realize it, winter was near at hand. The new court-house was quite completed, and the workmen gone. The little settlement seemed strangely quiet and deserted; the only residents left were the Elbridges, the Bensons, Rose and Robert, and the county treasurer. The rest of the officers lived miles away and came up periodically to attend to the business of the county.

The whole county was very proud of that new court-house. The substantial, red brick structure, with its bright tin dome shining like a star, and its slender steeple, was the most prominent feature in the landscape. It was one of the finest court-houses in northern Iowa.

"It will bring people. In spring there will be a great coming-in here; Harmony is going to boom," said Mr. Elbridge with satisfaction in his voice. But just at present

Harmony was most exceedingly quiet, and only determined heroism kept it from being lonely.

Rose found the duties of her tiny home much lightened by experience. She had a good deal of time on her hands now and did not quite know how to use it. She would have liked to help Rob in his preparations for farming, but he would not hear of that. So she roamed over the prairie, played with the children, took long horseback rides when Rob was not using the horses, and daily grew more rugged and strong.

The prairie life was good for her; she proved it in rather a strange fashion. Quite unexpectedly, she began to grow again. She had been supposed to have her growth, and perhaps it would have been so if she had remained back East. But here she shot up like a prairie weed. She had been a slender little Rose when she came; she was slender still, but she was fast becoming a tall Rose. She was prettier than ever; but, alas! her clothes did not grow with her. Her dresses became shorter and shorter, until Rob began to call her Shanghai, and she felt that the length of limb displayed beneath her once modest

skirts was appalling. Her arms grew out of her sleeves; her waists were all too short and too tight.

In sheer desperation, she commissioned Rob, on one of his journeys for supplies, to buy her some cloth and a paper pattern. Then her troubles did begin — or at least she thought so. She had learned a little of sewing but nothing at all of cutting and putting garments together. She made mistakes in everything. She cut one half of her skirt one way of the goods and the other half the other way. She made both sleeves to fit the same armhole. She sewed, and ripped, and sewed, and ripped, until she was almost distracted.

The autumn winds swept across the unsettled prairie with tremendous force. There was nothing to break them for uncounted miles, and they blew with a fierceness which the citizens of that many-towned, grovedotted state of to-day can hardly imagine.

The little house where Rose and Robert lived was propped up on supports that made it look, so Rose said, as if it were walking on stilts. One windy night it carried the resem-

blance too far, and a corner of it was blown quite off from one of these stilt-like supports and dropped down till it dragged on the ground. The brother and sister were awakened from the sleep of the innocent by an awful crash and jolt, and the beds they had been sleeping on seemed fairly to rise up and shake them off.

"Oh, Rob, our chimney is falling!" gasped Rose, mindful of her experience the last night she and Lydia had slept together. But this was different; there was a sound of slipping and sliding, and a horrible sag of the floor beneath them.

"Oh, Rob, it's the house that's falling down. Oh, what shall we do?"

"Seems like it," answered Robert, scrambling blindly with shaking hands for the matches on the chair where he methodically insisted that they should be placed every night. But the matches were not to be found for they had slidden to the floor and were now rolling far from his seeking touch. "I don't know what we can do. I could tell you, maybe, if I could get a light. Where are you, Rose?"

"I — don't — know! I'm out of bed. I think I'm on the floor! But it's so slanting! Oh, Rob, what can make that awful noise?"

It was a sound that could not really harm them in the least, but they did not know this; and it was more frightful than the clash of Gideon's pitchers which terrified and put to flight a whole army of Midianites. The piles of dishes on the shelves were slipping down the slope and off to the floor, breaking on top of each other with a clatter and clash that, in the dark, was most fearful. Robert tried to grope his way to the lamp, but the lamp had slidden off with the rest of the crockery and could not be found.

The darkness about them was as black as that encountered by the traditional blind, black man stumbling through the cellarful of black cats at midnight.

"Rob, Rob, where are you?" wailed Rose, reaching out into the darkness.

"Here." Rob gave up trying to make a light, and stumbled toward his sister's voice. They had just found each other and were trying to make their way to the door over the slanting floor, fearful every minute that

it would fall through under them, when a gleam of light came in at the little tilted window, and the rest of the inhabitants of Harmony, led by the first settler with a lantern, came swiftly to the rescue. Mr. Elbridge seemed not in the least surprised or dismayed by the scene of ruin that met his eyes.

"So ho," he said in a tone whose very naturalness was blessedly reassuring. "So ho! The wind has been trying to blow your house away. Well, it has n't succeeded, quite, but it seems to have made it decidedly unstable. You will have to come and finish your night's sleep in my house."

Hastily wrapping themselves up in blankets, for their day clothing was all heaped together in an indistinguishable mass, the two young householders did whatever could be done to remedy the disaster before daylight came, and then scudded in their incongruous garb across the intervening space to the home that had sheltered them upon their arrival, thankful, as many an Iowa pioneer has had reason to be, for friends.

In the morning a scene of desolation that

might well wring the heart of any house-keeper was revealed. One corner of the house had been blown entirely off the supports. This corner held the cupboard, and the china sliding down and breaking had made the awful crashing that had seemed as unexplainable as dreadful. On top of all the broken china two pans of milk and cream had slid off and emptied their contents. The appearance of Rose's once neat little house can better be imagined than described.

"It looks like a dog on three legs," said Robert.

"A very sick, droopy, miserable dog," said Rose, gazing with tears in her eyes on the wreck of her cherished china and housekeeping utensils. "Now what are we to do?"

"Come and live with us," said little Mrs. Benson, who adored Rose. "The Elbridges have Mr. Naylor with them, so you ought to stay with us this winter."

And so it was arranged that the two families should live together and share equally in the expenses. It was an arrangement that had many advantages for Rob and Rose, for it had been evident that their little house,

which served so poorly to keep out the rains of summer, could never be fixed up to keep out the cold of winter. It was good for the Rob was a tower of other family, too. strength anywhere, and Rose was not by any means a helpless helper now. Her housekeeping experiences had taught her much. Mrs. Benson looked up to her and consulted her in a way that was very gratifying to her pride and spurred her, as censure would not have done, to try her very best. In truth, the girl was more at ease with the Bensons whom she had helped, than with the Elbridges who had been so kind and had helped her. She always had been quiet and painfully shy in the Elbridge home, but here she kept the whole family laughing at her delightful whimsicalities. Little Betty loved better to talk to her than to play, and the baby was astonishingly tractable under her care. Yet Rose missed the little home where she had reigned supreme and often longed to go back to it.

After the early frosts, the Indian summer came, with beautiful days when the sun glowed like a great ball of fire behind a blue

haze, and the air was dim and smoky from morning till night. To look across the level expanse now was to gaze across a yellow sea instead of a green one; but still it was a shining and glorious sea, and Rose thought the deep blue gentians that stood up blithely in the browning grass were the most beautiful flowers she had ever seen.

There were the closed gentians that looked like buds just ready to open always, but never did open their eyes to the light. Handful after handful of these did Rose gather and kept in water for days, waiting for the unclosing, before she learned that it would never come. There were the common blue gentians, most uncommon in their beauty, like deep blue cups with most beautiful veining inside. There were the rare fringed gentians, with their pale, delicate petals and dainty airiness.

It was the most glorious time for wandering out-of-doors that could be imagined. It was also the most favorable time to make the long journey for supplies that could not be obtained in Shanley's Grove or Sanders' City; and early one October morning the

fathers of the two families started on the long ride, each driving a lumber wagon. They left their families to Rob, who was now regularly constituted deputy clerk, and the county treasurer.

CHAPTER VII

A PRAIRIE FIRE

"TCAN'T bear to have them go. I feel as if something dreadful was going to happen," said Mrs. Benson, wiping suspiciously red eyes, as she turned away from the door where she had watched the lumber wagons quite out of sight.

Rose smiled to herself. The truth was that the newly appointed deputy recorder's wife always felt as if dire disaster had come when her husband was out of her sight for more than three or four hours. And now they might be gone a week. The roads were better than they had been in the spring, but there was still danger that the heavy lumber wagons might stick in many a slough.

Rose was bustling around the little room that was kitchen, parlor, and bedroom all in one, and singing at the top of her voice. Very much like a strayed bird of paradise she looked in that bare, little, pioneer room. She had put on her best clothes for every day, since it was evident that she would outgrow them before they were worn out; and she was as fond of bright colors and combinations as little Betty herself. Her dress was deep blue, shimmering, summer silk, the very color of the blue gentians in the tumbler on the shelf beside the clock. Her apron was pink and ruffled, and, as a finishing touch, she had caught up a little, plaid, shoulder shawl and wound it around her head like a turban. She was convulsing Betty and the baby with an attempt at darkey talk.

"I'se your ole mammy come up from de souf to take care ob you pickaninnies," she said.

"What's picka — picka — ninnies?" began Betty, all interest, but her mother's attention was not to be so easily distracted.

"I feel as if something dreadful were going to happen," she mourned again.

"Oh, what could happen?" Rose had decided objections to the dismals. "Robert is here."

"Yes, Robert! But Robert is n't Jack." Rose's eyes flashed. "I guess Rob can take care of us, anyway. Mr. Elbridge said he left us in Rob's care — Rob's and Mr. Naylor's."

The two wives were both lonesome, though reserved Mrs. Elbridge did not express it as did her companion, and Rose was always glad of company. Very naturally the three gathered together when the work of the reduced households was done. It was an unseasonably hot day for the last of October, and they all brought their sewing out in the shade of the house.

"It seems as if I smelled smoke," said Mrs. Benson, looking up from the buttonholes she was making on Betty's diminutive apron.

"Maybe this sun has set the prairie on fire." Rose spoke with a laugh. "I'm sure it's hot enough."

The younger mother laughed, too, but the more experienced settler's wife looked serious. She lifted her head from the delicate embroidery she was doing in her unwonted leisure, and anxiety was in her face.

"I hope nothing will set it on fire," she said. "The grass is so dry it lights with a

spark in this season. One year it caught from a camp-fire a hunter made and swept clear across the county before they could stop it. I hope there won't be such a prairie fire this fall."

"It would n't matter to us. We have a fire-break," said Rose, serene in her ignorance. "Don't you know how the men plowed around us with the breaking-plow last month?"

Mrs. Elbridge shook her head. "That is n't enough," she said. "It ought to be back-fired too. He" — nobody was "he" to Mrs. Elbridge except her husband — "he meant to do it. But he had to start so much sooner than he expected that he did n't get it done."

Rose told Robert about it as they were eating supper.

"Yes, Elbridge spoke to me about that." Rob's voice had in it the importance of the man left in charge of the settlement. "He said I'd better do the burning the first still day."

"Oh, Rob, let's do it to-night. This is still. I'll help you."

But suggestions made Rob contrary, and

he was genuinely tired. "I guess if you'd been doing fall plowing all day as I have, you would n't talk about doing any back-firing to-night. I'm dog-tired, and I'm going to bed as soon as I can get there," he said.

Two hours later, Rose, stepping out of the door, saw that the sky to the northwest was very red. Marching along the horizon was a bright line of fire.

"Oh, Rob, do get up and look here," she begged. "There is a prairie fire coming! Let's go and back-fire."

Now Rob was one of the best boys in the world, but he did not like to go back on opinions once expressed. Besides, he honestly believed there was not the least danger. He dragged himself up unwillingly, but he refused to be convinced by the glare on the western sky.

"Stuff and nonsense! You're excited, Rose," he said in his most grown-up manner, too grand even to give her the usual nickname. "That fire can't get anywhere near us. It's way across the river. Go to bed, child, and don't worry. I'll back-fire tomorrow, just to please you."

Rose obediently lay down, but she could not forget her anxiety. The reflection of the fire shone directly in at her window and filled the room with a disquieting flicker of red light. On the wall opposite was a veritable picture of the prairie fire, the leaping flames looking like a conflagration indeed.

Very little imagination was required to transform it into a city blazing, and the small black spots that appeared and disappeared, into men and women struggling against a fiery destruction that was devouring their homes. Of course Rose knew it could not be that. There were no houses on that side of the river. But it did look fearful. Again and again she raised herself in bed to gaze, quivering, from the reflection to the flames. Once she even went over and put her hand against the side of the house to see if it were not hot.

"The fire is surely coming nearer," she said to herself a dozen times. "I must get Robert up."

But then the flames would die down again, and Rose would remember how Rob had laughed at her fears. She could n't bear to be laughed at. And then Rob was so tired; he had worked so hard all day. She would not for the world disturb him unnecessarily. She would lie awake and watch the fire and not waken him until she saw that she must. Probably he was right and there was n't any danger. She was over-anxious and foolish.

She lay back on the pillow with her eyes wide open. She did not mean to shut them until the red glow faded from the wall. But the lids had grown heavy and, in spite of herself, they closed. She pulled them open resolutely, but they shut again. After a quarter of an hour of ineffectual struggle, tired Rose lay fast asleep in the red glow of the distant flames.

How long she slept she did not know, but when she awoke the fiery glare was more terrifying than ever. She sprang from her bed, and ran to the window. Oh, there could be no doubt of it now! The flames had jumped the river and were coming straight toward the isolated little settlement.

"Rob! Rob! Get up!" she screamed.
"The prairie fire is coming! We'll be burned up!"

"Don't bother me," murmured Rob sleepily, without opening his eyes. "Fire's — the other side — of the river! Can't — get here!" And he turned over and was sound asleep in a second.

Rose called and pleaded in vain. She shook him with all her strength, but that did not rouse him. At last in desperation, she took a towel, dipped it in cold water, and spread it over his face. Then Rob woke, and he woke very angry.

"Don't you have any sense? This is n't any time to joke when a fellow 's dead tired," he growled angrily, as he flung it back at her. But when his eyes were fairly open and he saw the glare, he came to himself.

"I s'pose I might as well look at it, though it 's all girl's foolishness," he said, boylike, covering up the admission that he had been wrong by a taunting word. He strode across to the window and looked out. What he saw was enough to frighten a man of twice his years and experience, but it was not in Rob ever to own himself afraid. Indeed he was not — really. He was not experienced enough to fully realize the danger. The sight prom-

ised excitement, and Rob was fond of excitement. His voice was almost jubilant.

"Sure enough it is across the river," he said; "Susan B, we've got to fight it."

One might almost have said that he enjoyed the prospect of the fight. Just at that moment there came a tremendous pounding at the door, and Naylor's voice was heard calling. There was no jubilation in this voice, but it was cool and collected and had a ring of command in it that was very reassuring.

"Get out quick!" said the voice. "Prairie fire's coming. We must all turn out and fight it! Bring out all the heavy woolen things you can lay hands on; and grain-sacks and mops and everything that's heavy to beat it out with. And bring water, — all the water you can carry!"

"He knows what to do," thought Rose. "He won't let us be hurt." Strangely enough, her "he" meant some one quite different from Mrs. Elbridge's.

Never were clothes scrambled on more quickly. Luckily for the little settlement, the women had been washing and, as water was hard to get, had left it in their tubs for future scrubbing. Tugging and sweating, those tubs of water were dragged out to the furrows, and other pailfulls brought from the shallow well.

Naylor was already starting the back-fire. He had twisted up a wisp of prairie grass, lighted it, and drawn it across the dry brown carpet of the prairie. Then, with the coat that he had snatched from his own back, he beat out the flames as they advanced.

"You back-fire the other way," he shouted to Rob, without stopping his work. "Let the women carry water and beat out the side flames that go against the wind."

Rob went at it on the instant, as cheerily as if this were but a play bonfire started for fun. Mrs. Elbridge worked deftly, with the regularity and steadiness of a machine. Rose and Mrs. Benson, quivering with fear, but calmed and strengthened by the courage of the others, went at their part with all their might.

But it was horribly hard work. The heat grew stifling; the smoke blinded their eyes, and strangled, and choked them. Their faces and hands were blistered, and their clothing fast turning to blackened rags. Once Rose, horror-stricken, discovered that her gown was on fire; but Naylor beat out the flames with his wet, ragged coat and then wrapped it around her.

"Wear it," he said. "It is safer." Then, snatching up a grain-sack in its place, he went on pounding as if little accidents like this were nothing.

Rose felt braver with the blackened, tattered thing around her, as if she were wrapped in a prophet's protecting robe. A thought came to her in the midst of the awful heat and exertion, of the three men—and the Fourth who was not a man—who walked unharmed in the burning fiery furnace. It was a comfort, even though she had no time to think it out, but must devote every bit of brain and strength and nerve to do her task

Oh, those ugly, ugly, little side-flames, creeping like snakes through the grass to destroy them! No sooner did she get one pounded to death than a dozen lifted their heads. It was worse than trying to kill the hundred-headed hydra.

"We — never — can — do — it — " gasped the tired, frail, little, younger mother. "We — may — as — well — give — up! I think — I — am — going — to — faint!"

Perilously near to dropping she looked when to drop might be to fall right in the path of the flames.

"You would have us all burn to death!" But Naylor said, more wisely, and as cheerily as if the stopping of a hand in the fight were not a disaster:

"You'd better go to the house and see to the children. Just think, if they should run out here to the fire!"

All thought of fainting dropped away, and the little mother sped with renewed strength in her trembling limbs; for at that very minute two little white-clad figures came trotting out into the red light.

"Stay there and take care of them," called Naylor cheerily. "We will come and get you if the fire gets away from us, and we'll all run to the breaking; but it won't." He was pounding away with both hands while he spoke, and the others, inspired by his courage, bent aching backs and worked on with fresh vigor.

It was well for the threatened settlement that there was no wind that day except what the fire itself created. If the wind had swept over the prairie as it did sometimes, a dozen times as many workers could not have saved them.

Nearer and nearer came the great headfire, with appalling speed. Up and up mounted the burning wisps of grass, drawn by the ascending air current. Over and over they rolled, all aflame. It would have been a beautiful sight if it had not been so terrible. But the little group of fire-fighters, struggling with all their strength against tremendous odds, had no time to note its beauty or its terror. Only Mrs. Benson, gazing wild-eyed from the little cabin window, with a baby in her arms and two more clinging to her skirts, saw it all.

Higher, far higher than the roof, the flames rolled up. Blazing cinders whirled through the air by thousands. They struck the roof and sides of the house with a continual patter, turning black as they fell. They dashed

against the window-pane in a fiery shower, thicker than the rain-drops of summer. It seemed at last as if there were no possible hope and everything must go up in flame. She could no longer make out the figures of the fighters. Everything was all one horrible red glare.

"Mamma, how did the per-ai-rie fire get to burning? Mamma, why for did somebody make it? Mamma, mamma!" Little Betty was becoming alive to the situation. She clutched at the protecting skirts wildly, "is the per-ai-rie fire going to burn us up?"

Betty's questions ended in a wail, while independent little Totty doubled up her square, chubby, little fists and cried: "Go away, naughty prairie fire! You sha'n't burn us up!"

For what seemed like countless hours—though it was only a few minutes by the moon-faced clock, so horribly lighted up by the red glare that made the house as light as day—the crisis lasted. It was like being in the middle of a furnace. The window-panes cracked with the heat. Smoke began to pour from the roof and sides of the house.

Just as she was gathering the children to run, she knew not where, Rob's voice sounded outside. It was as cool and calm as if prairie fires were every-day affairs.

"Don't be scared. The worst is past now," he called. "The head-fire has gone by. Now all we have to do is to put out these little blazes. I'm going up on the roof. You come and pass water for me."

Agile as a cat, he climbed up the swaying ladder and clambered upon the smoking roof. Rose and Mrs. Benson passed buckets of water up to him, and he skipped nimbly from one danger point to another, pouring on water, while Naylor and Mrs. Elbridge performed a similar service at her home. Robert waved his hand quite spectacularly when the last smoking shingle was quenched.

"Show is over now; the spectators will please applaud," he said, as he descended.

"There are n't any spectators." Now that the danger was over, Rose even managed a giggle. "We are all actors — colored minstrels, I guess."

Certainly no company of tatterdemalions ever looked worse, and negroes could hardly

be blacker. Their eyebrows were burned ofi, and their hair was singed. Naylor's red moustache had yielded to a more fiery element, and Rob's hair was almost gone. The men's trousers were burned off below the knee and hung in blackened rags above it. Their coats had been used up in whipping out the flames. The women's gowns showed gaping rents. Every hand was blistered, and there was n't a shoe with a whole sole left in the crowd.

But they were very thankful and happy. Destruction had been driven away from their homes. Only by ever so little had the head-fire, driven away by the back-fire, turned aside, but it was enough; that slight veering to the west had saved the settlement. There was no need of more back-firing that year; the whole burned and blackened prairie was a protection.

Mrs. Elbridge, whose kindly, practical thought and boundless hospitality never failed, had the coffee-pot in her hand almost before the men got down from the roofs. Very soon the whole company were thirstily draining down cups of the strong, steaming beverage.

Then there was a great demand for oil and soft rags, for every one had burns to dress. There were smarting hands, and blistered faces and feet, but there was no complaint. The early pioneers were not made of complaining stuff.

At last the fiery glow died down, and darkness settled once more on the rescued settlement. It was a blacker darkness than ever before, for in front, behind, and on every side, extended the very image of desolation. Black as the floor of the nether world stretched out the burned prairie. Not a foot could press it without receiving the blackening traces of the destruction that had passed over it. When daylight came, they saw that cinders were banked up on the north and west sides of the house as high as the window-sills.

"The wind changed a little, and that was what saved us."

Mrs. Benson spoke in the ghostly gray of the earliest dawning, as she and Rose were making ready for bed the second time. The men had been sleeping the sleep of utter exhaustion for half an hour, but women always find something else to do before they

can yield to rest. "That was all that saved us; Mr. Naylor said so."

"The wind's changing would n't have made any difference if Mr. Naylor and Rob had not back-fired. It was the back-firing that saved us — and the men who did it; Rob and Naylor took care of us. I told you they would."

"Well, we all helped about that. It was n't Naylor and Rob alone." Mrs. Benson was loath to give any man entire credit except her Tack. "We all helped save the settlement. They could n't have done it without help." "No one could have done it without help," said Rose, and her voice was reverent. She could not say aloud the thought that was in her heart, the thought that had come in the midst of the flame and heat about the Fourth that walked with the three Hebrews in the fiery furnace. A strangely silent Rose she was about the deepest things. But it was with a very thankful heart that she loosened and laid aside the burned, tattered, blackened coat that she would let nobody take off from her.

"We ought to keep that coat for a sou-

venir," said Mrs. Benson, noticing. "It will be a fine thing for the children when they grow up. They can bring it out and tell about the dangers we went through. Naylor can never use it again. Let's wash it and put it away."

The coat was carefully and reverently cleaned and put away, but not by Mrs. Benson. Rose could have told where it was laid, but that was also one of the things Rose did not tell.

CHAPTER VIII

CATCHING A HORSE-THIEF

ITH November came startling news to the little settlement. A gang of horse-thieves were at work in this and the surrounding counties, who had stolen horse after horse. The robberies were most daring; more than one had taken place in the broad daylight. Strenuous efforts were being made to catch the thieves, but so far not one had been taken.

There was great excitement all over the county. Their horses were among the settlers' most valuable possessions, and also most useful, since there were no railroads, and supplies had to be hauled from twenty to a hundred miles.

Rose and Robert were very fond of their two horses, and Rose was dreadfully afraid that they would be stolen. She even persuaded Robert to send to Sanders' City for a padlock and lock up their barn every night; but this was not a complete success, for she lost the key, and Templar and Peter had to stand without food till the door could be broken open.

The excitement grew to a fever heat when Boulter, the recorder, came walking twenty miles into Harmony and announced wrathfully that his horses had been stolen the night before. He wanted some one to ride out to the sheriff's farm and get him and a warrant, and then to have all the men in the settlement go with him after the thieves, who were said to be following the old Indian trail to the north.

The older men looked doubtful. It was a cold, wet, drizzly day, and the long ride to the sheriff's farm was not in the least attractive. But Robert, ever ready to help, spoke up on the instant.

"I'll go," he said; and in a twinkling Templar was out of the barn, and Rob was pelting away on his back through the rain and the mist. Rose's eyes shone. Her brother seemed like a gallant knight of old riding away on a heroic quest.

"Oh, I wish I were a boy," she said. "I'd

just love to go out after those miserable horse-thieves and capture them. It would be so exciting. I've been wishing for an adventure all the week, but here, when a chance for one comes, I can't go because I'm a girl. I hate to stay at home and keep dry and warm when there is something like this to be done; I want to go out and do it."

"You'd better be glad you are a girl. There's something worse than rain to fear in going out after this gang," said Boulter gloomily, from the chair by the stove where he sat trying to dry his soaked foot-wear and dripping garments. "This thing is no pleasure trip. Horse-thieves go armed, and they'll probably shoot."

All the pretty color dropped out of Rose's cheeks, and Boulter wished he had not spoken so. She said nothing to the other women about it, but went around very quietly helping to prepare the dinner which the men must eat before they started. In the shortest possible space of time, Rob was back from his long ride, with the sheriff at his side. The meal was eaten hastily, and the homeorganized posse started out.

It was a dismal day to start anywhere. Even the new pine of the unpainted houses of Harmony looked dingy and weather-beaten. The whole world was water-soaked and dreary. As far as the eye could see, the prairie stretched in a blackened expanse, a memorial of the prairie fire that had nearly destroyed the settlement. It was a dreary sight in the sunshine, and still more disheartening in this November drizzle.

Rose stood long at the window with baby Dillie in her arms. She was making the child stand upon the sill and wave a gay good-by to the departing men with her chubby hand, but the girl's heart was anything but gay. She had bravely refrained from mentioning Boulter's words to her companions, but the chilling fear of them was shaking her heart. What if the horse-thieves should shoot; what if they should shoot Robert!

She did not like to tell her fears to grave Mrs. Elbridge, who seemed far above such terrors, and she knew that even to mention them would utterly unnerve timid Mrs. Benson. But it was very hard to bear them alone. She did her best to throw them off

and stepped briskly about, clearing the table and singing as she rattled the dishes. But Rob's gallant young figure, pelting off in the rain, was ever present in her mind's eye, and terror kept tugging at her heart-strings.

"Don't you suppose they will be back by supper-time?" quavered little Mrs. Benson.

"No, it's not in the least likely," answered Mrs. Elbridge, who had been petitioned to move her household there for the afternoon. "They have a long chase before them. I don't see how they can come up with the horse-thieves before dark, even if they find that they are on the right track. They have had so much head start, you see."

"Oh, mercy me! Will we have to stay alone all night?" gasped the newest and timidest settler. "I never thought of such a thing! It is n't safe! Jack ought not to have gone and left us. What if another prairie fire should come!"

"There's no danger of more prairie fires this year," laughed Rose bravely. "There's nothing left to burn."

"Well, there's danger of some kind. They ought not to have all gone away and left us.

Jack at least ought to come back," said Jack's wife.

"She does n't think that there can be danger from the horse-thieves. I'm glad of that," thought Rose. Then she smiled and answered the most encouraging thing she knew.

"You would n't want them to miss a minute of the few excitements that come here. I only wish I were a boy so that I might have gone, too."

"Oh, I am thankful you did n't go, too," said Mrs. Benson. She was very sure that Rose knew a great deal and could help in every emergency. Her very trust made Rose braver.

All the afternoon the ears of the three were alert for the sound of returning hoofs. At dusk they heard them plainly. "Oh, they are coming back," cried the deputy recorder's wife joyfully. But it was only a single figure, riding alone over the blackened prairie.

"Some traveler," said Mrs. Elbridge, and in spite of herself her tone showed disappointment. They were still less pleased when the traveler alighted. He was not a pleasant guest to receive. Of course, in those days, every one who passed through the little settlement must be the guest of the settlers. This man looked unkempt and seedy. His face was haggard; his eyes were furtive; his whole appearance was, somehow, disreputable.

"Where's the men?" was his first question. Prudent Mrs. Elbridge would have kept silence, but the timid and troubled wife of the latest settler poured out the whole story of their loneliness. Rose imagined that the man's eyes shone with an evil light, when he heard the answer, and his voice was certainly bolder. He demanded, rather than asked for, something to eat. They gave him a supper as a matter of course. Every-passer-by was fed and lodged on demand in those sparsely settled days. But this man did not want a lodging, although the early darkness was falling. He must have supper quickly, he said, and go on.

Mrs. Elbridge, as the most responsible person in the settlement, came bravely to the front and asked the man questions; but his answers were decidedly unsatisfactory.

He replied to the inquiries vaguely, and gave no lucid account of himself. He was going to the west, he said. He had come from the north. He had not met the searching party from Harmony. (This was true because he had taken particular pains not to meet them.) He must go on that night.

"But it is forty miles to the next settlement west, and there is no road. You will run straight into a slough in the dark. It would be far better for you to wait till morning."

Mrs. Elbridge spoke out of purest kindness of heart, for she certainly did not prefer to have this unpleasant guest remain. But he answered her with unnecessary surliness.

"No use talking. Got to go on to-night." Then Rose turned from the stove and slipped outdoors. It had come to her, while the man spoke, that his horse looked somehow familiar. To be sure, horses were apt to look alike. But this bay one with the peculiar white mark on its forehead, — was it not Boulter's? Of course it was. This was Boulter's stolen horse, and the man was one of the horse-thieves they were after.

What was to be done? She ran out and shut the barn door and padlocked it. Now, at least, he could not take the horse away. If she could only lock up the man! What fun it would be to prove to Rob that girls and women could do things as well as men!

A secret summons called the other two, one at a time, to a consultation behind the wood-pile. The man inside was snatching his food and bolting it as if he might never have a chance to eat again.

"I am sure he is one of the horse-thieves the men are after," said Rose. "We must n't let him go. We must lock him up and keep him."

"I feared so when I talked with him," said Mrs. Elbridge gravely. "But how could we lock him up? If we lock the doors, he can break out of the windows. If we made him angry, he could overpower us all. It is n't as it would be if there were any place where we could go for help. We can do nothing but let him go and send the men on his track when they come back."

"Let him slip right through our hands? Oh, we must n't!" cried Rose.

"That is better than some other things," said Mrs. Elbridge, and Rose remembered Boulter's words with a shudder.

Little Mrs. Benson was fairly overcome with terror.

"Oh, let him go! Send him away!" she cried. "I'd be afraid he would murder us in our beds."

"He could n't, if only we had a safe place to lock him up!" said Rose. And as she spoke, a quick thought came. The courthouse vault, built of brick and iron, was supposed to be secure against anything. It had no window and there was a combination lock on the massive door. It was as secure as any prison could be. Once fastened inside there, escape would be impossible. If only they could get him in there!

The man at the table was calling for more attention. His food had put new strength into him, and he was not using it gratefully. He was not in the least afraid of three unprotected women, and he fairly snarled.

"I want something to wash this down," he said. "My throat is as dry as a chimney. Hain't you got any liquor?" He leered unpleasantly. "I know the men have. Where is it?"

Mrs. Benson began an indignant denial, but Rose stopped her with a look. A plan had come to her by which she might possibly get the man into the place she desired.

"I don't know that there is any," she said truthfully. "But I did hear the men say something about storing some in the courthouse vault. If you would look there, you might find some."

Again the man's eyes glittered with that evil light. There was something else to tempt him in the vault, but foolish Rose did not think of that.

"Of course the vault's locked!" he growled.

"I can open it." answered Rose. "I know the combination."

"Well, take me there," the man grunted. "I'll see if I can find any."

Trembling with fear lest her hastily contrived plan should go wrong, Rose led the way across the dreary, water-soaked space to where the court-house loomed strange and grim in the gathering darkness. She unlocked the heavy front door and pushed it open.

It was quite dark inside and seemed suddenly full of terrors. Rose guided the man through the long hall and, with trembling fingers, turned the nickel-plated knobs and unlocked the great iron door of the vault. while the man lighted matches so that she could see the figures. What a blessed thing it was that she had learned the combination in an idle hour while Rob worked over something he was doing for the absent auditor!

Everything inside was in perfect order. Naylor, the treasurer, was not a man to leave things in any other way, even in a sudden call like this. The strange man made believe to hunt for the drink he had come after, but his eyes were all for the safe. When would he have such a chance again?

But the matches that went out so quickly were not enough for what he wanted to do.

"There's a lamp in the treasurer's office," said Rose, divining his wish. "Shall I get it for you."

"Yes, and be quick about it!" He followed her to the door. Oh, how friendly and soul-comforting the very furniture in the treasurer's office was! If only the red-haired incumbent were sitting on the high stool! Rose went up to it and managed to brush against it as if its very touch were protection.

"Come, don't be all night!" growled the voice that had suddenly become so dreadfully familiar. "No, don't give the lamp to me. You go ahead and hold it for me."

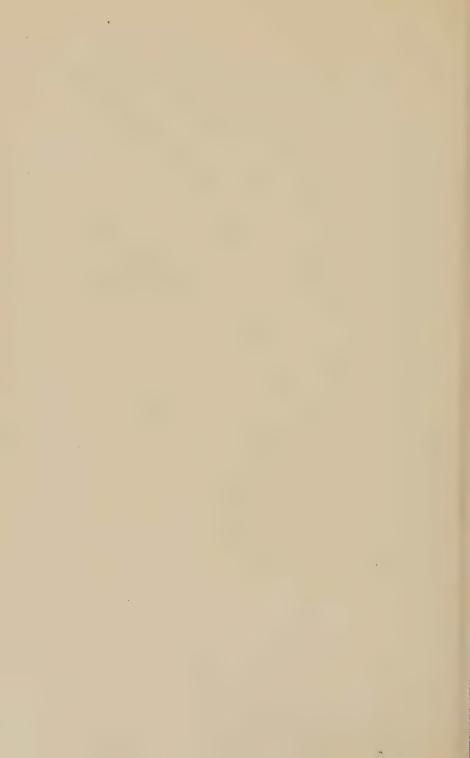
Plainly she could not get him inside the vault while she remained outside. She must try some other way. The man bent over the safe door.

Now was the time for her to act. As quick as thought, she blew the light out and hurled the lamp toward him. Then in the darkness she darted through the door and slammed it shut. It caught the edge of her skirt but she tore it out. Her plan had succeeded. Taken by surprise, by the sudden darkness and the blow, the man did not follow her quick enough to reach the door before it closed. The spring lock held it fast. At last he was a prisoner.

He banged and pounded at the heavy iron door. He filled the house with fearful oaths and threats. But he could not get away. Rose ran swiftly across the drenched grass to the house where the rest waited in fear.



The man bent over the safe door. Page 164.



"I've got him. We've caught the horsethief the men are after! He's locked up in the court-house vault!"

They did not look as pleased as she might have wished them to be at the news. Mrs. Benson was terror-stricken. Mrs. Elbridge looked troubled.

"The vault is where all the county money is kept," she said gravely. "Suppose he should get away with that!"

"Oh, I never thought of that!" cried Rose in dismay. "But he can't, because he can't get away."

"We must make sure of that. We must guard the door till the men come back."

And so a shivering little procession made their way to the court-house with pillows and blankets, for no one wanted to stay alone at the house, and the children could not be left. They made a bed for the little ones on the floor; and the women sat shuddering to hear the blows and curses that came from the locked vault.

All night long they sat, weary and miserable. What a wearisome, dim light the smoky kerosene lamp cast around! How

faint and feeble was the struggle it made with the surrounding blackness! How the rain beat on the inky black windows! How terrible were the threats and mutterings of the prisoner!

"Oh, if only the men would come!" sighed the two younger watchers again and again. "What a dreadful, dreadful night!"

"I wish you had let him go," said Mrs. Benson a dozen times at least. Mrs. Elbridge did not reproach or complain. She sat bolt upright hour after hour, and no murmur passed her patient lips. But her silence made Rose quite as miserable as the other's murmurings. She was beginning to think that she had done very foolishly and brought a lot of trouble on her friends, and to wish, herself, that she had let the horse-thief go. The minutes dragged interminably. It seemed to her that the night had already been forty-eight hours long.

Twelve o'clock! One o'clock! Two o'clock! Three o'clock! Rose could not watch the time any more. Her head had fallen down on the desk, and she sat fast asleep on Naylor's high stool.

Slowly, slowly, the darkness faded into grayness, and the grayness brightened into dawn. It was a strangely white dawn, pure, soft, and clear, - such a dawning Rose had never seen on the prairie. She would have delighted in it, but she was fast asleep, with her head on one of the great closed books. Mrs. Benson was sleeping, too, on the floor beside the children. Only faithful Mrs. Elbridge, whom no weariness or distress could make to fail in anything that was laid upon her to do, was awake to watch. The blows and curses from the vault had subsided. The prisoner was also asleep. Not even the wind made a sound; silence wrapped the prairie like a garment.

The only waking watcher stepped noise-lessly to the window. Truly it was a wonderful white garment that was wrapping the prairie. In the night the rain had turned to snow. White, white, and softly shining lay the wide expanse that had been so black and dismal. Not a footprint, not a track, as far as the eye could see. The pioneer's wife caught her breath. It was as beautiful as a vision of heaven. Then she forgot all

about the vision, for, far in the distance, she caught sight of a group of moving, black specks.

They came on and on. Soon the snow-muffled tread of horses' hoofs was heard approaching. The pioneer's wife turned with a cry of joy.

"They are coming! Our men are coming!" she cried.

The others roused up joyfully at the words. Snatching up shawls and flinging them over their heads, Mrs. Benson and Rose ran out over the shining, untrodden prairie to meet their returned wanderers.

Such a forlorn and disconsolate party of men as they were! They had had no success; they had had no supper! They had ridden all night in the freezing rain and accomplished nothing. Horses and men were alike encased in rattling suits of sleety armor.

"What are you doing in the court-house at this time of day? Why are n't you at home where you belong?"

Rob's tone was cross; and surely if ever a brother could be pardoned for speaking crossly it was after such a night as this. Rose, fresh

and rested from her little nap, and flushed like her namesake with the gladness of having Rob beside her again to scold her and care for her, rejoiced in his very crossness.

"Oh, Rob, we have got business in the court-house — important business!" she cried exultantly. "We 've got somebody to watch in there. Rob, we've got the horse-thief! I locked him up in the court-house vault."

"You!" Rob's voice only faintly expressed the astonishment he felt. "Say that again, will you, Susan B? I don't believe I heard right."

"We 've got the horse-thief you were after - the one that stole Mr. Boulter's horse. He's locked up in the court-house vault. We 've been watching there all night. We 've got the horse, too! It 's in the barn. We can do something, if we are only women folks."

"Great Cæsar!" The amazement in Rob's tone amply repaid Rose for the long misery of the all-night watch.

Clamoring, wondering, asking questions, commenting, forgetting hunger and discomfort and weariness in the excitement of this strange happening, the men crowded around her. Never had she been treated with such distinguished consideration. The court-house was entered, and patient Mrs. Elbridge who had not left her charge even to go and meet her Jason, was relieved from duty. The sheriff handcuffed the prisoner and took him to a warmer place in the recorder's office, where he was guarded until he could be taken to the nearest jail, which was at Sanders' City. The women's part in the adventure was happily finished.

What a joy it was to get breakfast for "the men folks!" To fry crisp and brown the slices of fat salt pork which was the only meat they had! To mix flour with the drippings in the frying-pan and pour in the milk for the delectable white gravy that was their chief stand-by! How delightful to set Jack's plate and Rob's plate on the table, to cut the bread in quantity and make the coffee good and strong! What a pleasant thing it was to be alive! What a happy thing to be a pioneer girl and be praised! Rose sang as she had sung the day before while she flitted around the little kitchen, but this time her singing was not forced.

CHAPTER IX

A STORY AND A SCARE

OSE'S prisoner was the only horsethief captured in all the county, and the only stolen horse recovered was the one locked up in Templar's stall. He was restored to his owner, and the thief taken by the sheriff, with Rob's proud assistance as duly sworn deputy, to the nearest jail, two counties away. His capture led later. through information he gave, to the breaking up of the gang, and Rose found herself quite a heroine. She was praised for her achievement till her cheeks glowed; but it did not usher in that feeling of peace and security that might have been expected. Scarcely was the horse-thief excitement allayed before another more fearful terror gripped the hearts of the settlers of the district.

Indians! Indian uprising! Indian massacre! They were terrors that seemed then

not at all vague and shadowy, but very near and real. It was only a few years since the massacre at Spirit Lake when Ink-pa-du-tah's band fell on the unprotected, scattered, little cabins without the slightest warning and left the mangled bodies of thirty-one men and women and children lying in their blood in the snow.

A rumor was started that the Indians were going on the warpath again. Suppose they should come down upon them as they had at Spirit Lake! The old Indian trail was still plainly marked from north to south across the county. Every summer a band of Indians, mounted on ponies, filed stolidly across it to their favorite camping place at Indian Island. There was little to fear from these, who were peaceful and shy of the whites, but what of the wilder, hostile bands of the north! A chill of fear swept across every woman's heart; and even the men who scoffed at the idea were not so unaffected as they pretended to be.

Winter had fallen early on the little settlement. There was still much to do to prepare for it. Fortunately the first snow

melted away and was followed by a warm spell. The settlers made every effort to prepare for the long, bitter winter that was coming. The little houses were banked up to the window-sills, and heavy, home-made storm doors of unplaned lumber were fitted to each door. Storm windows were necessary, too, but it was impossible to obtain panes of window-glass nearer than Sanders' City, so they were ordered to be made and brought from there.

"Looks as if we were getting ready to keep out the Indians, does n't it?" said Rob, lightly, as he swung around the ponderous storm door he and Jack Benson had been setting up, and tested the position of the iron hook and staple that fastened it.

He was sorry he had said it the next minute. Rose's bright cheeks turned white, and little Mrs. Benson screamed. Baby Dillie, catching the feeling of terror, began to shriek at the top of her voice, and Betty joined with more pitiful, because half stifled, sobbing.

"The Indians is coming! The Indians is coming!" she wailed.

"Nonsense! I was only talking! Can't you folks see a joke?"

But it seemed a grim joke at that moment, even to Rob. He was glad for any change of subject or thought.

"Look over to the other house," he said. "Mr. Elbridge has a visitor. My, but he looks tickled to see him! He walks lame. I wonder who he is."

They found out soon. Little Totty came tripping over to them with her funny, little, independent gait.

"Tumpany's tum," she announced gleefully. "It's the man that went to scare away the Indians when they were killing folks. Papa likes him awful lots."

It was very evident that he did. Jason Elbridge's face was beaming, and his voice was as full of joy as a girl's as he introduced his friend to the others.

"This is one of the best fellows in the world," he said. "This is Lieutenant Decker, the man I told you about, who went on the Spirit Lake Relief Expedition. He can tell you more real Iowa experiences than any one else I know."

"Stories?" queried little Betty, dancing up and down in delight. "Oh, I like peoples that tell stories."

The lieutenant's face was seamed and weather-beaten. His cheeks were curiously scarred. His hands were maimed; and his stiff, limping gait showed that his feet were crippled, too. But the courage and kindliness in the scarred face drew the hearts of every man, woman, and child in the settlement. Little Totty, who had ruled as a queen over the court-house workmen, and had not been wont to show favors without the most respectful solicitation, ran to him at once. Baby Dillie toddled over to his knee; and to Betty, with her craving for stories and perpetual re-iterated "Why for?" he was a perfect mine of treasure. He answered her innumerable inquiries with the utmost patience, and the small, golden-curled maiden was exceedingly happy in his presence.

"Why for are your cheeks marked up that way?" she asked, as she patted the scars, from her perch on one arm of his chair, while Totty occupied the other, and baby Dillie leaned her soft cheek blissfully against the

front button of his waistcoat. "Why for are your hands like that, too?"

Her mother, shocked at the personal character of the questions, would have reproved her and called her away; but the visitor, with a return pat of the curly fair head, answered:

"Don't stop her. I don't mind. They are scars of honor. They were frozen, Betty, dreadfully frozen that time that Mr. Elbridge told you about, when I went to drive away the Indians."

"Why for did you stay out till you were so cold? My mamma says I must n't. Why for did n't you run to the house and warm?"

"There was n't any house to run to, not for miles and miles. There was n't any place to get warm. There was n't any fire or any bed to creep into."

"Oh, tell me all about it. It sounds so intrusting."

The small story-lover leaned forward with parted lips and sweet, eager eyes — a sight bewitching enough to beguile a story out of any child-loving man who knew the slightest hint of one. This was a good story, and the

lieutenant felt a pride in it. It is an account of Iowa heroism which deserves more space than it has ever received in any history of our country.

"It was this way, Betty," he said, quite willing to give the narrative for which Rose's eyes as well as Betty's were begging mutely. "The Indians across the line in Minnesota got angry at the whites and went on the warpath. Do you know what that means?"

"Oh, yes, I know." Betty had not heard all the alarming rumors that floated about without comprehending some of them. "They go out to kill folks. They st-e-al up to folks's houses like ours, and shoot the fathers and the mothers and the childrens. And sometimes they carry them away. That's what Indians do. They're awful bad."

"Yes. That is just what they did at Spirit Lake. When the word of the massacre came to Fort Dodge, we knew that somebody ought to go and see about it, and drive the Indians away, if they were lurking around there yet, and see whether anybody was alive, and bury the dead that the Indians had left lying where they killed them. But it was seventy

miles, over an unbroken, unsettled prairie without a road or a track, and the snow was deep. Three feet on the level, and from six to thirty feet in the gullies and drifts! The men who went would have to walk every step of the way, wading through the snow; and blizzards might come up at at any time and catch them and freeze them to death. Oh, it was a terrible trip to undertake! At any minute the Indians might come down on them as they had come down on the Spirit Lake settlers.

"'Who will go?' ran the word as soon as the message of the massacre was brought to town. We had called a meeting in the old brick schoolhouse to see what could be done. It was Sunday night, but there was no church that night. The best way of worship, we thought, was to plan a relief expedition for the distressed settlers of Spirit Lake.

"'I will go,' said one man. 'I will go,' said another. 'I will,' said a third; and another, and another. So many volunteered that they could not all be accepted. They formed two companies; and a third was formed in Webster City and came up to go with us. There

were a hundred men who started out, equipped as soldiers, marching off through the snow that cold March day.

"But such marching as it was! I don't believe a company of soldiers ever went just so before. A crust had formed over the snow, and under the crust it had melted till it was the most insecure footing that could be imagined. A light man might walk over it in places for a yard or two; but the heavy men in the company broke in and sank down at every step, and the crust was so hard that it was an effort to clamber up. Try as hard as we might, we could go only a few miles each day. We took some ox-teams and wagons to carry our supplies — scanty supplies they were, too, for we had started in such haste, thinking of nothing but getting to the distressed district as quickly as possible, that we did not stop to gather all we would need. But we found that we had taken all we could possibly carry. The snow was so deep that the oxen and horses could n't haul the wagons through it. We had to break a track for the teams, ourselves. Sometimes we would march back and forth through a drift in two columns,

as far apart as wagon wheels, till the track was broken. Sometimes we shoveled a way for the wheels with shovels. But often the drifts were so deep that we could n't do either way. Then we had to unload the wagons and carry everything that was in them across on our backs. When they were empty, we hitched ropes to them and hauled them through the snow. Then we threw the oxen on their sides, fastened ropes to their horns, and pulled them through as we might pull bales of goods. We had to haul the horses through so, too. It would have been funny to see if it had not been such a serious matter. Once the oxen's neck-yoke caught, and the men were pulling so hard that they pulled them right up in the air and they hung suspended. But we were too cold and too anxious to go on to see the funny side, then. Every few minutes we had to stop and rub our cheeks and our noses with snow because they were frozen. If we pulled off our boots at night we could n't get them on again in the morning, because they were frozen too stiff. So we learned to sleep in our boots."

"Where did you sleep?" asked Betty, with big eyes.

"We slept in the snowbanks, mostly. Sometimes there was a shed or a hog-pen or a house that we could go into. But there were very few houses along the way. We learned to put our blankets down and roll up against each other as close as ever we could to keep each other warm. If one turned over, all the rest had to turn over, too.

"When we could, we made our night camps in groves, for the trees kept the wind off a little. We could build a fire there, too, for there were sticks and branches in them to build it with. But out on the bare, open prairie there were no sticks. We could n't build a fire and we had to eat raw frozen pork and crackers.

"When we could take off a wagon box and set it up and stretch the canvas cover between it and the wheels, we thought we had a fine warm place to sleep in. But all of us could n't sleep at once. We had to keep watch, you know, for fear the Indians would surprise us and fall on us. Some of us had to watch while the others slept. Oh, how hard

it was to tramp back and forth through the snow in the night, with feet and fingers aching with cold and our limbs so tired from pulling us through the snow all day that it seemed as if we must drop down where we stood! Often a guard fell down in the snow, overcome with weariness."

"What did you eat? What could you cook when you had a fire?"

Rose felt that she knew something about cooking on a camp-fire, but hers had been a summer journey with every convenience that could be provided. That had been hard enough. How very hard this must have been!

"We could n't cook anything a good deal, for we could n't have a fire. Our first meal, and a good many after, was made on crackers and raw ham. When the crackers were all gone, we had to boil cornmeal or flour to make mush, or stir them up into pancakes. But the pancakes were hard to bake, for we had no shortening, and could scarcely get so much as a bit of ham rind to grease the griddle. They were n't very good, either, for we ran out of salt, and a more tasteless

mess than clear flour and water stirred up with nothing else is hard to find. I remember well one night when the men were so tired out that they would n't stay awake for their pancakes. They flung themselves on their blankets on the floor - we slept in a house that night - and only begged not to be disturbed. But the captain knew that they could n't hold out without some food. Till twelve o'clock we sat up, the captain and I, baking pancakes for those men. We baked enough for one man, waked him to eat them, and then baked for another. Oh, how tired and sleepy we were! It seemed as if we should pitch into the fire sometimes from very weariness, but we kept at it until every man was fed

"To tell the truth, we never had enough to eat. We could n't carry along enough rations. The settlers along the way were few, and they had very little with which they could supply us when we did strike a settlement. All their supplies had to be hauled by teams from Fort Dodge or Muscatine or some place as far away, and the long cold winter had almost exhausted them. To give to us was to reduce themselves to want. We had to go so much slower than we expected, on account of the deep snow, that we almost starved. Once we bought a beef—such a gaunt, lean ox as it was,—killed and cooked it. Again, when the owners utterly refused to sell, we took a steer by force. But most of the time we were not where we could find any provisions to take. There came days when we had not even flour and water to stir up pancakes with. What do you think was the best meal I ever ate, Betty? It was on this expedition. What do you think we had?"

"Ice cream," answered Betty promptly. "Ice cream and mashed potatoes and oyster soup and choc'late cake and doughnuts."

"No," said their guest. "It was biscuit mixed up with sourings and water, no shortening, and baked at one o'clock at night, with fried meat and molasses. Nothing else in the world ever tasted half as good to me. But it was when we had marched all day and half the night without anything to eat. Our provisions were all gone. The last meal we had cooked for ourselves had been flour and

water, boiled together into the stickiest, starchiest mess you could think of. But even that tasted good, and we did not have so much as we wanted of it.

"It was after we had turned home from Spirit Lake. The Indians were driven away. We did not do that, for troops from the north had done it before we came. We had buried the dead and seen that all the survivors were safe. It was with very thankful hearts that we turned back to our homes. It had been much harder than any one dreamed that it could be, and now at last we thought our troubles were over. But oh, they were not over! The hardest time of all was awaiting us.

"Our clothes had become so worn in the march that we had scarcely enough to cover us. I had a flannel shirt, a pair of trousers with one leg torn off at the knee, and the other ripped from top to bottom, and only one boot, and that with the leg cut off. The other boot had been held too near the fire when it was frozen stiff, and burned till it fell to pieces. But I had more clothing than most of the other men. I wrapped my bootless foot in a piece of blanket and trudged on, thinking myself lucky.

"It was the first of April, and the winter was breaking up. It had turned quite warm, and the snow was melting fast. Such a quantity of snow could not melt without flooding the country with water. Every little creek was turned into a rushing river. The sloughs had become wide, spreading lakes. It was harder to get across them than it had been to plow through the snow. Some we waded; some we swam; some we managed to cross on boards and logs from the trees that fringed their edges. We were wet to the skin and thoroughly tired out. When we were in this condition a sudden change of weather came. The wind whipped around to the northeast, and a driving snow began to pelt down. The mercury dropped lower and lower every minute.

"We had come to a creek, once little, now spreading out half a mile on each side of the channel, and were planning how to cross it when the change came. We could wade out to the channel, but it was so deep and swift that we could n't get across it. "The only way we could think of was to make a boat out of a wagon-box, have the men wade out as far as the channel, and run them across it in the improvised boat. We stuffed the cracks in the wagon-box with cotton that we pulled out of a bed-quilt, and succeeded in launching it, with our captain and one other man inside it and two more to wade along on each side and keep it straight.

"They reached the channel; the two waders managed to clamber in, and they pushed the box across to the other side with long poles. But there the straight-sided, unbraced boat struck a mass of ice and doubled up like a jack-knife. It broke all to pieces and floated down the creek in separate boards; and the four men had the greatest difficulty in scrambling through the icy water to the bank. They were across at last, but now they could not get back to us. We had no possible way to get across. We had no food; we had no shelter. Our clothes, which had been dripping wet, were now frozen as stiff as boards. The wind was blowing a fearful gale, and the temperature far below zero. Our captain was almost wild. He tried

again and again to get back to us, but he could not.

"We were indeed in a desperate situation. We were wet and frozen in our scanty clothing. Darkness was coming on and the snow was blinding. We had no way to make a fire, for the timber that would have furnished us sticks to burn was completely surrounded with water. We had no tents; and hardly any blankets. It is little wonder that our despairing captain was sure that not one of us would ever be found alive again."

"What did you do?" It was Rob, usually so carefully impassive, who asked the question, his face alive with interest. This was a hero story told by a real hero.

"We took the canvas wagon-cover and stretched it out to make a shelter. We shoveled snow up around the edges to keep the wind out as much as possible. We put the horses and oxen in the most protected place on the south side. Then we crept in and lay from Saturday evening till Monday morning, as close together as sardines in a box, while the storm raged outside like a demon waiting for our lives. We knew that

to try to go anywhere then was certain death. No one moved or stirred through all those long freezing hours, except when two or three would pull themselves up and go out to shovel up more snow where the wind had blown it away and made an opening.

"Our captain, on the other side of the creek, was almost frantic with anxiety for us. He was sure that we were all freezing to death. He made attempt after attempt to cross the creek to us again, but the current was so swift that it would not freeze. But so cold was the weather that even that racing current froze at last. On Monday morning the blizzard had cleared away, and we staggered up the creek till we found a place where the ice was strong enough to bear us and our teams as well. We reached Shippey's cabin, where our captain and his three companions had found shelter from the storm, with not a man lost. But ever since that awful time my hands and feet and face have been like this."

"I only wonder that you lived through it at all," said his friend, with a shudder.

"I sometimes wonder, too," answered the

lieutenant, and his voice was very earnest. "Since that time I have served all through the Civil War, and marched from Cairo to Chattanooga, from Chattanooga to Atlanta, from Atlanta to the sea, and from the sea, through the Carolinas, to Richmond. Under burning suns, through rain, sleet, and snow, in hunger and thirst and fatigue, we endured great suffering; but never in all that time could our suffering be compared with that of the two terrible days and nights we endured on the banks of Cylinder Creek.1

"I think no army ever suffered more. And I am sure no sight was ever more welcome than the little Shippey cabin to the starving, freezing men, who staggered to it, nor the sight of those men to their captain to whom they were as men risen from the dead.

"After this experience our company was disbanded, and the men directed to make their journey home by the route that was the nearest for each one. It was necessary, for we had no more food to carry, and the cabins along the way could not provide for so many.

¹ Governor Cyrus C. Carpenter, in his address on the Spirit Lake expedition.

So scantily were they supplied that they could hardly be expected to furnish us anything at all. A few of the families flatly refused, and we could scarcely blame them. But most of them were very kind and divided their scanty stores with us, even when it left them painfully short themselves.

"There were nine men in our squad. We started out bravely, glad at the very thought of going home. But we had suffered so much and we were so weak and faint that some of the brave fellows were entirely crazed. We had hardly begun our journey before the man who marched beside me, a hero who had helped the others through thick and thin and used up his own strength for the rest, gave out completely. He would n't go on; but kept turning back. He had lost his mind, and he maintained that his home was behind us, toward desolate Spirit Lake. In spite of all our efforts, he turned constantly to stagger back. When we went after him and brought him on, he tried to fight us for hindering him, as he said, from going home. At last he collapsed altogether, and we had to carry him every step the rest of the way.

Sometimes he got sense enough to hold himself up so that we could take him on a chair made of our crossed hands, but most of the time we had to carry him on our shoulders.

"So we marched on through the snow which the blizzard had brought back as deep as ever, mile after mile of plodding, with no dinner and no supper, and no certainty that we were on the right way. The darkness came; but there was no sign of the grove and house we were seeking. One drift looked exactly like every other. We staggered on as long as we could stand, but near the middle of the night we all sank down utterly exhausted. In our scanty clothing and enfeebled condition, we could not have lived many hours if help had not come. But help did come; it seems as if it had been directly sent.

"It came from the settler and the settler's wife whose home we had been vainly searching for in the darkness. They had gone to the house of their nearest neighbor — a good long walk, but pioneers did n't mind that — to spend the evening. One thing after another had delayed their return until they

had started back just in time to come upon us when we were succumbing to cold, hunger, and exhaustion. If they had come to the spot a few minutes earlier, they would not have found us; if they had come later, I fear it would have been too late for some of us. It was one of the things that happened just right — the things that make a man believe in Providence.

"I had tried to keep awake to see that the other men were not freezing. Every little while I dragged myself up and went around to shake them and rouse them. But they sank to sleep again, and at last I, too, sank into a sort of a stupor; though I do not think I was asleep. In this stupor I saw, or imagined I saw, a light and two dark figures coming across the snow.

"'Indian scouts,' I groaned to myself.
'They have found us at last, and they have
us at their mercy. Our time has come now.'
I was too far gone and too miserable to think
of defence, and I did not look up again until
I felt a hand upon my shoulder. But the
hand was not the rough one of an enemy;
it was soft and gentle, a woman's hand.

"'Mother,' I said. I thought I was dreaming, for I had dreamed again and again of mother coming to bring me more covers and food in the midst of my suffering. 'Mother!' Then I looked to see the figure vanish as it had vanished in all the rest of my dreams. But this figure stayed. The hand that touched my shoulder was real. A real voice said in the sweetest tone I have ever heard:

""What can we do for thee?"

"What could they do? There was nothing that we did not need. I staggered up and realized for the first time that it was a man and woman, a white man and woman, settlers with a lantern. I begged for food for the half-starved company and shelter from the cold and a bed for the two who had altogether given out, and they answered:

"'We will do all that we can for thee.'

"From one to another we went, calling and rousing them. They helped and guided us to their little home. They built up a great fire and straightway went to cooking food in the middle of the night. They put the two men who were utterly spent into their own bed and tended and cared for them like brothers. Then they set the table for us, and oh, what a meal it was! Biscuits and fried meat and molasses — all they had in the cabin! It was the grandest meal I ever ate in my life. And the place that seemed to me the nearest like heaven of any I ever saw was the cold little loft where Mrs. Collins put us to sleep, after our breakfast-dinner-supper was over, with all the blankets and comforters in the house, except those our two comrades below were using, to cover us. The next day we were able, most of us, to go on with our journey, and we reached home safely without any more adventures."

"But did the relief expedition do any good? You did n't catch the murdering Indians."

"Do any good?" The man's eyes flashed for an instant. Then they softened.

"It would have been worth many more sufferings than we endured if all we accomplished had been the rescue of the refugees from Springfield. If we had not found them, they would certainly have perished of starvation and exposure."

"What's refugees? Won't you tell us

about that?" queried the small story lover on his knee.

"They were the people who got away from the Indians, Betty. Nobody got away at Spirit Lake, but at Springfield a good many did. The Indians had attacked the house where they were gathered and killed some of them and wounded others. But the settlers shot at the Indians from the houses, and at last drove them away.

"They were afraid that the Indians would come back; and so in the middle of the night they hitched up their oxen, which were all the Indians had left of their stock, to an oxsled and started to go to some place where they should be safe. But it was all dark. They did n't know where to go; and the oxen went slowly. The mothers carried their little children; the wounded were put in the sled. They had no food except a little dry corn. It was bitter cold, and they had no way at all of making a fire or getting warmed. Their clothes wore into tatters on the march. The children were crying of hunger; and the wounded were suffering agonies. They had traveled three days and four nights and were quite in despair.

"At last they saw what they thought was a band of Indians coming down on them.

"It was no use to try to get away. 'We shall all be killed,' they said. But they were bound to do all they could to defend themselves.

"The one man who was not wounded took all the guns and went ahead to keep the Indians off as long as he could. The rest of them hid down behind the ox-sled, but they knew it could protect them only a few minutes. Can you think how these poor people must have felt, Betty?"

"Did the Indians kill them all?" Betty was very near to tears. The story-teller hastened to make things more cheerful.

"No, indeed! The Indians did n't get a chance to touch them. Listen, Betty. It was n't Indians at all that they saw. It was just us, and we thought they were Indians. We were all ready to shoot at them. But our captain would n't order us to fire.

"'Let us shoot them! Let us shoot them!' we begged. We were raging against the redskins. Beside us was a man whose cabin had been burned, and whose wife and babies had been massacred by the Indians—or so he thought—while he was away. When we looked at him we could scarcely keep our fingers from pulling the triggers. 'Let us shoot the red devils,' we begged again. But just as the word was given, this man, Church, threw down his gun and dashed ahead.

"Boys,' he cried, 'there are my wife and babies.'

"'He has gone crazy,' we said sadly. 'He has had so much sorrow that it has turned his brain.'

"But he was still running up to the approaching party, shouting like mad. We put down our guns.

"It is n't Indians,' said our captain. 'It 's white people. They must be flying from the Indians.'"

"And was it?" cried Betty, with shining eyes.

"Yes. It was William Church's wife and babies and all the rest who had got away from the Indians. Oh, how happy he was and how happy we were! We laughed and we cried and we shouted. We jumped up and down to think we had saved them. It was worth every suffering we had gone through with."

"That's a nice story. Tell another."

"Oh, no, no, no!" said Betty's mother, reaching out her arms for the baby. "The child will never get to sleep if she has anything more put into her head. I must put her to bed."

"Will the Indians come here, do you think?" asked Betty in a scared tone, as her mother led her off.

"No, no, Betty. Those Indians would n't dare ever come near any settlements again, and the rest are peaceful. You need n't be afraid of Indians."

They could believe it while they had the lieutenant, so strong and brave and full of experience, to reassure them; but after he was gone, the story he had told them, though immensely interesting, did not tend to make them more fearless. The terror of the vivid realization of this narration was added to the vague fears that had beset Rose before, and she began to start and tremble at every sound. She would not have had the others know it for the world; but timid little Mrs. Benson

saw no reason for concealing her fears. The men laughed at them, but Rose could not help feeling that they, too, were secretly uneasy.

One morning she awoke to find a chilly white fog enveloping the little settlement like a clammy winding-sheet. She could not see the Elbridge home, a hundred feet away. She could scarcely make out the outlines of the wood-pile beside the door. Everything was cold and damp and ghostly white. The homely, familiar sounds of the settlement, that came to them bodiless, as it were, out of the enveloping mist, seemed strangely different, and smote the heart with an unreasonable, nameless dread. It was in this condition of mind that quivering little Maggie Benson, stepping outside the door, heard other sounds that were altogether unaccountable. Strange sounds they were out of the mist, that sounded like groans and shrieks and cries. She ran in with a face as white as chalk and clutched Rose's arm.

"The Indians are coming to massacre us!" She whispered as if she were afraid of the sound of her own voice. The dish that Rose

was washing fell to the floor with a terrifying clatter and was broken into a dozen fragments.

"Oh, where? How do you know?"

"I can hear them. They seem to be coming from everywhere and killing people, too, by the sounds. They are surrounding the settlement. They have killed the rest of the people in the county, and are coming to kill us. Oh, what shall we do?"

"Do? We must run to the court-house as fast as we can and defend ourselves there. Lucky the men are all there. It's brick. They can't set fire to it nor batter it down. Come quick! I'll take the baby, and you take Betty."

She snatched up baby Dillie with one hand and Jack's gun with the other, and darted down the mist-covered path. Mrs. Benson had not expected such immediate acquiescence. She had been by no means as certain of what the sounds portended as she had seemed to be. She had expected Rose to question or dispute her statement, and the prompt action terrified her still more. With her small daughter clinging to her skirts

impedingly and asking a dozen unanswered questions, she sped down the misty path after Rose. They flung open the door and dashed into the court-house with terrified faces.

"Indians! Indians!" they gasped. The men flung down their pens and record books and came running down the long hall, astounded by the sudden clamor. "What is it?" cried Jack Benson, catching frightened Betty up into his arms.

"Indians! Muvver saw them! They're killing folks! They're coming to our house!" cried Betty shrilly.

"No, Betty, they're not at our house—not yet. And nobody has seen them. We are not sure. But oh, Jack, I heard them! Such awful cries! I can't think what else it can be."

Then the men rushed out of the door to look and listen. Looking was useless in the mist, but they could all hear the cries. Mr. Elbridge strode away to his own home to bring his wife and little daughter. Mrs. Elbridge came back with him quite unruffled and serene. Rose felt calmer just to look at her.

"It's not Indians," she said decidedly. "Indians would n't come up against a settlement making any such noise as that. If they really meant to harm us, they would creep up as still as death, and we would n't hear a sound till they began shooting. That is some sound across the river."

"It sounds like" — Naylor was ready to hazard any guess to allay the fears of Rose and Mrs. Benson. "It sounds to me like men driving oxen."

"It is. That's just what it is. It is only the mist that makes it so unearthly. What did we order, Elbridge, that could be brought by oxen?"

"Storm windows. That must be what it is. But those fellows are not coming the right way. They are going too far south before they cross the river. They won't ever get here at that rate. They 'll go straight past without seeing us, and there is n't an other settlement between here and Argola, forty miles away. They will get quite bewildered. There is n't a landmark that they can see. We must shout to them and make them turn in."

But the shouting did no good. The wind, which carried the sound of the ox-drivers' shouts straight to them, carried their voices directly away. They could hear that they were going farther and farther.

"We must make a rescue party, we men, and go out and bring them in."

That was Naylor. He was always ready to go out to help any one in trouble. But little Mrs. Benson clung to her husband's arm, quivering like a leaf.

"Oh, don't. Don't anybody go. They might be Indians. You don't know. They might shoot you as soon as they saw you."

"They would n't see us very soon in this fog."

"No, and you could n't see, either. You could n't see your way back. You'd get lost. There is n't a sign of a track, and the fog hides everything. Oh, don't go!"

Her nerves were quite unstrung, and she broke into sobbing. Then Betty, whose unanswered questions had done more to frighten her than any answers could have done, was sure that something dreadful was going to happen and began to cry piteously. Totty,

who had been untroubled, as became a pioneer baby, began to cry because Betty cried. Little Dillie, of course, caught the infection and likewise began to weep, and Dillie's weeping was no small matter. More noise could come from her little, round. opened mouth than it seemed possible for so small a pair of lungs to produce. Pandimonium reigned in the little settlement for a few moments, and even the much feared Indian attack could scarcely have produced a greater uproar. But at last the clamor was quieted, and half in earnest and half in joke a plan devised that was absolutely safe for all concerned. It was Naylor who arranged it, with a humorous upcurve to his lips that turned the whole matter, which had been such a terror, into a bit of sport.

The women and children were to stay by the houses and shout out through the mist to the rescuing party at stated intervals. The men went off into the whiteness with the guns that belonged to the settlement, on their shoulders. They went as far as the women's voices could be heard. There one man stayed and the others went on, to station themselves at similar intervals where the sound of their voices, or of the guns which were fired to catch the attention of the moving party, could be heard by the next in line.

It took a long time to attract their attention, for they were all the time getting farther away, and the noise they made themselves in shouting to their oxen shut out all the more distant sounds from their ears. Yet, now that the fear was gone, the whole thing was very pleasantly exciting, and a most agreeable experience to remember. To stand guard, like the outposts of an army, signal into unseen space, and receive back an answer from invisible fellow-guardsmen, was a delightful adventure. And when the oxteam and its load loomed out, big and vague, from the concealing mist, it was like the coming of desired guests who had been expected and awaited a long time.

Very stiff and cold were the two drivers of the ox-team, for they had been out for many hours. It had been only a little misty when they started and they had never dreamed of its turning like this. They were grateful to their rescuers, for if they had not been

called back, they would certainly have gone past the settlement and been as thoroughly lost as if they had been miles away.

The clammy fog had chilled them to the bone, and the searchers likewise were getting chilled; but that made it only the more pleasant to sit around the glowing box-stove, where Mr. Elbridge had built up the fire as only he could do, and smell the appetizing odors of cooking which began to fill the house. Best of all, to Rose and Mrs. Benson, was the assurance that the Indian scare was only a false rumor which had been entirely disproved.

Suddenly the wind changed and wheeled around to the north. The enveloping fog thinned, lifted, melted away. Crystal clear and icy cold, the tiny settlement and the boundless prairie that surrounded it were revealed. But the inhabitants of Harmony and their guests, in the heart of the cold loneliness, were perfectly happy. The winter peace and quiet had begun.

CHAPTER X

IN THE WHITE WORLD

HE next day the storm windows, whose coming had been the innocent cause of so much agitation, were set in place, and the creaking ox-wagon started back on the return trip across the frozen prairie. They were not put up a day too soon. Fierce and sudden the winter swooped down upon the little settlement. The snow fell thick and fast.

The first large flakes, floating dreamily down from the soft gray sky, were very beautiful, and set the children wild with delight. But the feathery flakes gave place to round little pellets hurtling down with such force that they fairly stung the cheek they struck. Then, if a wind blew, came the dreaded blizzard of the prairie. The snow rose from the ground in swirling masses to meet the snow from the clouds. Everything was hidden by the thick white curtain.

Rose's first experience with a blizzard was one never to be forgotten. It came on the evening of a washing-day.

She and Mrs. Benson had worked hard and faithfully and had succeeded, in spite of many difficulties, in putting out a fine lineful of clothes. Hanging out clothes on a winter day is a harder task than on a summer day. They froze stiff the moment they touched the line, and the thumbs and fingers that shook them out and pinned them on were aching cruelly before the task was done. When the evening came, they had not dried or thawed at all; they were frozen to the line, and hung as stiff as iron pokers. A comical sight they were, but it was not at all amusing to detach them and bring them in. Besides, there was no place in the little house to dry them.

"Let's leave them out all night to whiten, and perhaps the sun will dry them in the morning," said Rose.

"Oh, are n't you afraid somebody might take them?"

The question was purely the reflex action of old habit. They both knew that there was nobody for miles around to take them.

"No, they could n't be safer." Rose laughed, but her laugh was wistful. "I'd almost be willing to lose some of them to have somebody come," she said.

"It's snowing," cried Betty at the window, as the darkness fell. "Rose, is the Sky Lady you told me about picking her geese?"

"I think she must be. See what big white feathers!" answered Rose. But she never thought of the necessity for bringing in her washing. The men came in all covered with snow.

"Wind's rising," said Rob, delighting in the thought of any new experience. "Elbridge says we will have a blizzard before morning."

Rising! It was soaring! How it shrieked and howled around the lonely little houses in the middle of the prairie! The snow on the ground leaped up to meet the snow in the air, and in half an hour the blizzard was raging with full force.

"Oh, Rob! The clothes!"

Rose did not think of it till bedtime. "I must go out and bring them in," she said

taking her shawl from the nail. But her brother swept her back with a strong arm.

"This is no night for a girl to be out," he said. "Benson and I will bring in those clothes."

Jack Benson rose from the cozy corner behind the stove, his look of comfort changed to one of concern. "They ought to have been brought in when first the wind began to blow," he said.

They came in, looking like two shaggy white bears, without a single garment in their arms.

"Why, where are the clothes?" gasped Rose. "You surely did n't think it was best to leave them out in the storm."

"All we could do," answered Rob. "Your clothes have started to the south pole. We could n't overtake them. I should judge that they must be nearly there by this time, the way the wind blows."

"Every one blown away," said Jack Benson. "Not so much as a stocking or a pillow-case left on the line. Don't worry," for Rose looked exceedingly distressed. "They are lying under the snow somewhere. We will find them when it melts."

But not so much as a handkerchief was ever found. Rose smiled in after years at the thought of how the stiff things must have looked careening over the prairie, but she did not smile then. For weeks she could scarcely look at the clothes-line without a pang at what she thought was her carelessness.

All night long the snow blew and the wind howled. Again and again Rose put out her hand to brush away something cold. But she could not brush it away, and finally she buried her head beneath the bedclothes and slept, completely covered.

In the morning the bedcovers felt strangely heavy. She lifted her head. The bed was covered with snow; the stove was covered with snow; the floor was almost covered. At every tiniest crack and crevice the wind had forced it in. Every hanging string and cobweb on the walls had become an exquisite white festoon. The window-panes were dim sheets of frosty lace-work. From under the keyhole a drift as high as the knob of the door had formed, extending like a long slender tongue, quite up to the stove. And they had considered their house tight and well-made.

Rose put out her hand to reach the garments she had taken off, but they, too, were covered with snow.

"Lie still, Susan B," said Rob's voice beyond the calico curtain. "This is a day for us men to get up. We've got to shovel out before you put your nose out of bed."

Then he got out the bushel basket and scoop-shovel and set to work. Twelve basketfuls of snow were carried out of the house before it was in a condition fit for the women to do their daily work.

Meanwhile Jack Benson had been trying to build the fire, and finding it the more difficult of the two operations. They had only green wood to burn, and the snow had sifted all over the supply behind the stove. It was sifting in all the time, and fell hissing on the top of the stove after the fire was finally started, keeping up a perpetual and disheartening sizzle like fine rain. But the fire was well started at last, and the two young women, bribing the little folks by every promise they could think of to stay in bed, rose and, shaking the snow from each garment before it was put on, proceeded to get

breakfast, in hoods and cloaks and overshoes and mittens.

Getting out to do the chores after breakfast was a matter of great difficulty. The barn might have been miles away, for all they could see of it. Even the side of the house at arms-length could be discerned only by touching it, and all traces of trodden paths were obliterated. No sound could be heard but the howling of the storm.

"Nonsense, who ever heard of not being able to find one's way to his own barn!" said Rob with boyish scorn, when it was suggested that they should n't try to feed the stock and milk the cow till noon. But several trials convinced him that it was more difficult than he had imagined. The white, shifting veil of snow was more baffling than the darkest night. It took a quarter of an hour of feeling around before he found the house again. At last they proceeded together in organized effort to reach the invisible barn, much as if they had been trying to discover their bearings in an impenetrable mist of an unknown sea.

One took a long pole in his hand. The

other kept close to him with a clothes-line, one end of which had been securely tied to the door-knob of the house. Together they plunged through the drifts, swinging the pole about constantly to discover what was ahead of them. It was a long time before they struck the side of the barn; and then they found, to their astonishment, that they had walked clear around it, and approached it from the opposite direction. They fastened the line to the door of the barn, and after this, whenever they had to go out to do the chores, they guided themselves by that.

To go to the well in the court-house yard was quite impossible, without a further supply of clothes-lines. They scooped up snow at the door and melted it in the wash-boiler to drink and cook with and water the stock. If anything could have made the little house colder—which indeed seemed impossible—it was this melting snow that drew from the atmosphere the heat that had been put there with much effort, and was sorely needed.

Three days the blizzard lasted. When it cleared and they could see around them again, the whole surface of their world was

changed. The drifts were piled up as high as the eaves. They did not touch the house. A current of wind around the corner had prevented that. But at a distance of three or four feet, they rose up like fortifications. The dwellers in one little house could see nothing at all of the other except its chimney, sticking up above the whiteness. To go back and forth between them, a path was cut through drifts high above Rose's head. There was almost the effect of walking through a tunnel.

"I wish I could go coasting," said Rose, remembering frolics of the East. "We could n't go at first because there were no hills to slide down, but now there are hills all around us, and we have n't any sled."

Rob looked thoughtful. He could not bear that Rose should not have everything she wanted. A long time he moved about in a brown study. Then Rose saw him climbing up to the top of the drift before their door with a pail of water in each hand. He poured the water down the steepest slope and then brought more.

"I'm making our slide," he said, in answer to her inquiries.

"Yes, but where will you get a sled?"

"I'll show you." Rob held up the big scoop-shovel. He tied a rope to the handle of it and carried it up to the top of the drift. Then standing upright on it, with the handle before him, and grasping the rope firmly with his hands, he shot down the hill at a great rate. Of course it tipped over at the bottom, and rolled him off into the snow, but that was but an incident to his pleasure.

"Here's our sled," he said. "Come out and have a coast."

With dancing eyes, Rose wrapped herself in cloak and shawl and hood and nubia, — for the weather was twenty-five below zero, — and went out to enjoy the delightful sport; feeling sure, as she had a hundred times before, that there never was a brother before so clever and good as her Rob.

"I want to go sliding, too," cried Betty, when she caught her first glimpse of the sport; and Totty coaxed in her own irresistible way, with her soft little hands around the boy's knees: "P-l-e-a-s-e, Wob, let me go sliding, too."

To slide down hill in a scoop-shovel was

rather beyond the capability of such tiny, would-be coasters; but kind-hearted Rob was not going to let any girl wish in vain if he could help it. He opened the trap-door in the floor and went down the short stairs to the dark little dirt cellar scooped out under the house. There, holding a portion of household stores, was the big, battered, tin dish pan that had been put out of service by the fall it got when their summer home slipped from its support.

"Here's a sled for you and Totty. You can slide down in this," he said.

So, bundled up in cloaks and shawls till they looked more like round little cabbages with two roots apiece than like little girls, Betty and Totty added themselves to the coasting party, and even the graver and older members of the settlement were persuaded to take a turn. All through the cold bright afternoon they coasted down the snow-drift in a scoop-shovel and a tin pan, and laughter floated up in happy little clouds of vapor to the frosty sky. Truly there was much pleasure in pioneer living.

Another winter sport which delighted the

children, and which Rose and Rob were not yet too old to enjoy, though it seemed to the others rather too strenuous to be amusing, was wading through snow-drifts and plunging waist-deep into the cold soft whiteness. They liked to make snow angels and snow butterflies, lying down at full length on the soft snow, and imprinting an image of the body, and then adding gigantic wings by moving the outstretched arms from above the head to below the waist. But they could not enjoy any outdoors sport for long. It was too cold.

It was cold outside and in — below freezing for weeks at a time without a let-up. It seemed to Rose that she had never felt such a bitter chill. Sitting at the table at their morning meal, the coffee cups froze to the saucers before they could drink the contents. The ink that she put on the edge of the hearth to keep thawed while she wrote a letter to her mother froze there instead. If a glass or pitcher were inadvertently set away with milk or water in it, that was the end of the receptacle. In a very little while, one heard the ominous click and the unfortunate bit of

tableware was discovered to be full of a solidly frozen mass, bulged up in the center, and shot through on all sides with shining fractures.

With great difficulty the women of Harmony, after much tribulation in the raising and baking of salt-rising bread, had obtained a setting of yeast which was most carefully guarded. The only possible way in which Rose could keep it from freezing was to put the jar containing it in her feather bed; and all winter long she slept upon it.

Their few potatoes were frozen as hard as rocks. But Mrs. Elbridge, who was wise through bitter experience, instructed her neighbors that if they were kept frozen, and plunged unthawed into a kettle of boiling water to cook, they made fairly good eating. If they thawed out before they were put on to cook, they were spoiled; but there was no difficulty in keeping them frozen.

The days were cold, but the nights were colder still. All through the night the boards and the frames and roofs of the little houses snapped and crackled in the frost and made strange, unexplainable noises that sounded in the darkness as loud as pistol shots. When

the settlers woke up in the morning they often found the images of their sleeping figures neatly outlined on the upper quilt in hoar frost. The quilts and blankets were frozen stiff around the upper edges where the sleeper's breath had touched them; and if any one thinks it a pleasant experience to jump out of bed on to a board floor on such a morning, his experience would not coincide with Rose's.

It was indeed a cold world. To wear hoods and caps and cloaks and mittens in the house became so common that it was rather a surprise to see any one unwrapped. When it was necessary to go out of doors, these were supplemented with bed-blankets, quilts, anything that could be put on.

When the roads permitted the men took turns going to Shanley's Grove every week for ordinary supplies, and often to Sanders' City, a place of a thousand inhabitants, for supplies that could not be obtained nearer. But many weeks the weather was so bad and the roads so drifted that they could n't go; and they must get along with such provisions as they had.

Very clever Rose and Mrs. Benson became at making something out of nothing, and Mrs. Elbridge had always been a wonder at such contriving. When one supply was gone, they substituted another, and they became very proud of their successful substitutions. When the coffee was gone, they browned together wheat and sorghum molasses, and bravely declared that they could not tell the difference. When the sugar box was empty - as it became early, for even the supply in Sanders' City ran out — they used sorghum molasses, bought by the hogshead, for sweetening. When the flour was gone, they parched corn, ground it in the coffee-mill, and with this home-made corn-meal made mush and flapjacks which they heroically asserted they preferred to bread - till more flour came. The cow which had been led across the swamps with much difficulty, was a real treasure. So long as they had her milk they could not suffer. The men got along nicely on salt pork and beans day after day, but the women grew tired of them as a steady diet and longed for a change. Especially did delicate little Mrs. Benson, who found such hearty fare hard to digest, and was a victim to frequent sick headaches, long for the unattainable delicacies of her eastern home.

"No, thank you, I could n't eat any," she said feebly one day as she lay white and weak, her aching head wrapped with a wet towel, and Rose brought her her dinner.

"Is n't there anything you could eat?" said Rose, feeling quite ready to do something desperate to get something that would nourish the ailing mother.

"Nothing but oyster soup," Mrs. Benson tried to say it with a laugh, but her pallor, and the strained look about her eyes that told how severe the pain had been, made it rather a sorry jest. Rose turned away quickly, for an idea had come to her. In one of the dailies which came to the far-away little settlement in bunches, once a week or once a month as the case might be, she had seen a receipt for making from dried codfish a soup which it was said tasted very much like oysters. She would try that.

But their supply of codfish was out, and she ran over to borrow of Mrs. Elbridge. The Elbridges' was also out. All they could find in the whole settlement was one dried up bit of codfish skin. But that, they thought, might be enough to give it the flavor. On Mrs. Elbridge's stove, that the invalid might not suspect, and with Mrs. Elbridge's invaluable assistance in the matter of composition and seasoning, the soup was concocted.

They cut the codfish skin into small bits, and rolled them up into morsels about the size of oysters. They boiled them until the water had almost boiled away. Then they added milk and salt and pepper and butter, and Rose carried the covered kettle to her home. She dished up a portion in a soup plate, put the last of the crackers beside it, and brought it to the invalid, daintily set out on a tray which no one who did not know would suspect of being only a shingle covered with a napkin.

"Here's your oyster soup," she said. Mrs. Benson's eyes grew bright with delighted surprise.

"Where did you get your oysters?" she asked.

"From Sanders' City," answered Rose, for that was where the codfish had come from. "It's delicious," said the convalescent, partaking with eagerness of a dainty spoonful. "It's the best thing I've tasted since I left home."

Of course she found out the hoax after a while; but codfish oyster soup was immediately added to the settlement menu, and voted a great addition.

In spite of the freezing temperature and much unavoidable discomfort, the winter days were pleasant ones in Harmony. Shut in from all outside diversions, they were compelled to furnish amusement for themselves and each one felt responsible. No one dared to be homesick or grumbly or gloomy. There were no cliques or divisions, or separate social circles with their accompanying jealousies and heartaches, to render any one unhappy. All were equal; all shared in everything. Indeed, it has often seemed a doubtful question to those first pioneers whether these later days, with their greatly increased advantages of churches and schools and society, have given anything that can really compensate for the loss of the old spirit when all worked together, each one for every one else. Very jolly merrymakings were held in the little one-roomed cabins with their calico dividing curtains, while the wind whistled outside and the mercury dropped to twenty and thirty below zero. Delicious candy may be made from sorghum molasses when one is far away from a candy store; and a treat of scraped turnips is a very great treat when there is no possibility of getting apples.

"What are you going to get up for our Thanksgiving dinner?" asked Rob one morning, as he covered his sixth pancake with sorghum and helped himself a third time to fried salt pork.

"What would you like?" asked Rose.

"Meat pie. We have n't had any since we came here. This is all right, but we would like something different to celebrate. Could n't you make a dandy meat pie, the kind that mother used to make?"

Rob saw no reason why meat pie should not be made with dried codfish and salt pork, but Rose looked troubled. How could she make a meat pie without any fresh meat? The meat-man, who made occasional trips about the country through the summer and fall, had stopped coming with the cold weather. Rob's beginning seemed to start the rest to wishing for the impossible.

"I'd like some mince pie," said Jack Benson. "Mince pies go with Thanksgiving."

"I'd like some hash," said Betty. "We used to have hash at home, muvver, lots. Why don't we ever have it now?"

Rose's brow cleared from its pucker just then, for she had thought of a way to get her dear Rob what he wanted.

"Rob," she said, "if you will help me catch snowbirds, I can make you a snowbird pie. That would be delicious, I know."

"I'll help," said Rob.

"I'll make the crust," said Mrs. Benson.

"We'll eat it," chorused the rest in happy anticipation.

For three days they talked only of snowbird pie. The other family were all invited over to share it. On the day before Thanksgiving, Rob dug a hole in the snow and propped the sieve above it by a stick to which a string was tied in such a manner that a twitch would bring the whole thing down and imprison the birds beneath it. He scattered grain under the sieve and then hid, with the string in his hand, and Rose, of course, beside him.

Down flew the dainty little snowbirds with delighted chirps. Rob pulled the string and down came the sieve, taking in a fine catch.

"Shall I wring their necks and set It for some more?" asked Rob of Rose.

Rose had knelt down by the sieve that held the frightened, fluttering little prisoners. Rob stretched out his hand toward it. But Rose pushed it aside with sudden violence.

"Don't you touch them," she cried, and her eyes were blazing. "I would n't have one of them put into a pie for anything. The dear little things! They came down to us because they thought we were going to give them something good. They sha'n't be hurt. It 's bad enough to catch prairie chickens so, but these tiny little birds! One would n't make more than a mouthful. I'm going to let them go this minute."

With a sudden motion, she snatched the sieve away, and the snowbirds flew up with a joyous twittering. She broke the stick across her knee and threw away the string.

"Well," said Rob, in great apparent astonishment, "how are we going to get our Thanksgiving pie?"

"I don't want a Thanksgiving pie if we have to kill snowbirds to put in. I'd rather eat salt pork and codfish every day of the year."

And that was the end of the snowbird pie scheme. The others laughed at them, and snowbird pie was a Harmony joke for a long time, but a snowbird pie was never baked there. That afternoon a man was seen coming in a bob-sled over the white drifts. It was the owner of one of the nearer farms, coming to the county-seat to transact necessary business. In the bottom of his bob-sled was a great bundle wrapped in month-old newspaper.

"I've brought you some venison," he said to the county clerk and deputy recorder, as he handed it over to Mr. Elbridge. "We killed a deer up our way the other day and we were mighty glad to shoot it, too, for we have n't had any fresh meat since the snow came. Wife said you were probably in just the same fix, and I'd better bring you some

of it, seeing that you have given me so many meals."

It was a generous supply, enough for several Thanksgiving dinners for the settlement, and they had a feast indeed. Everything they had wished for was provided. Mrs. Elbridge made a venison pie which was pronounced the best thing that ever was tasted. The same thing was agreed about the mince pies, though they were made with venison for meat, sorghum for sweetening, and the last of Rose's dried apples for fruit, mixed in with the hard, sour, little crab-apples. They even had the hash, for Rose chopped it up with the butcher knife on the dry-goods box that served her for a kitchen table.

"Does any one wish snowbird pie?" asked Mr. Elbridge, with the humorous twinkle in his eye as he glanced at the full plates.

"No, no, no," was the emphatic answer; and the snowbirds twittering about the window seemed to add happiness to the general chorus.

The time went by with little to mark the days until Christmas was at hand. Rose, casting about through all her childhood

memories for something to amuse her insatiable little auditors, had told them story after story of Santa Claus and Christmas trees.

It was not the wisest story to tell on a windswept prairie miles away from a tree or store, but she did not think of that till suddenly they came to a realization that the children were expecting these same things in Harmony.

"Are n't we going to have a Christmas tree? Is n't old Santa Claus coming here?" asked Betty, with the tears starting at the very thought of any other possibility.

"I am afraid he can't possibly get through the drifts," answered Rose, for the first time realizing the limitations of the situation. But the children would not listen to that for an instant.

"Tourse he tan tum," said Totty, with an emphatic toss of her logical little head. "What are his weindeer for if it is n't to tum over the snow? Tourse he will tum, an' we mus' have a Trifmas tree."

"They shall have a Christmas tree," said Naylor, who heard. "They shall have a Christmas tree, if I have to haul it all the way from Purlington Woods on a hand-sled." Fortunately this was not necessary, for a few days of clear, cold weather packed the drifts so that the horses had little difficulty in drawing the big bob-sled across the prairie to the woods, and evergreens were to be had for the cutting. But the supply of gifts which they were able to purchase was meager indeed.

"That's the biggest doll I could possibly get," said Jack Benson, laying a small parcel down carefully in his wife's lap. Mrs. Benson shook her head sadly as she opened it, for it was a very diminutive little lady, indeed, — not more than five inches long, with a china head about as big as a thimble, black china hair parted in the middle, a slim little sawdust body, china hands that reached just a little below the waist, and long slim lower limbs, china below the knees, with pink garters and very blue china shoes painted on them.

But Rose took it up with delight. "I always thought little dolls were nicer than big ones," she said, "and I am sure Betty will, too. We will make the prettiest clothes you can think of out of our scraps, and Betty will love it as well as if it were a fifty-dollar, Paris doll."

A poor attempt at a Christmas tree it might have seemed to less optimistic eyes, with no adornments save the few, small, scattered presents and certain ornamental cuttings of paper made by the women's hands. There were not even pop-corn strings, cranberry chains, or gilded nuts to adorn it, and the presents seemed very few and small in its great branches. But to little Betty it was the most wonderful tree that ever was seen, and her tiny, cheap doll the greatest treasure that was ever given to a little girl.

Every detail stamped itself joyously on her small brain. The delight of being muffled to the eyes and carefully placed, like the most precious of parcels, on the big, clumsy handsled which Jack Benson had made to take the place of Rob's scoop-shovel and tin pan! The bliss of being hauled by father's hand over the creaking path, where the fitful gusts now and again drove flying dashes of snow! The wonder of being out in the mysterious, inscrutable night! The blessed certainty that father was taking care of them and, whatever might be happening on the wide, desolate

prairie around them, he would not let them get lost or frozen!

Then the entrance into the dim, shadowy court-house which, shorn of its daytime familiarity, seemed to childish eyes immeasurably immense and full of mystery! The ascent of the winding stairs to the court-room above the offices, with mittened hand held close in father's! The great resounding court-room where the tree was set up, empty as yet of all court furniture except the big, glowing stove! The dim, mystical light that only faintly illuminated the scene of festivity, although every lamp and candle in the settlement had been called into requisition! The weird, shadow-haunted corners! and oh! the Christmas tree!

A bare and pathetic tree it might seem to the elders, but to Betty it was all that could be desired; and the tiny five-inch doll on the lowest branch was hailed with a rapture that brought a lump into the throats of the spectators.

There was a program, to which each one contributed with a good will and desire to please that more than made up for any lack

of skill. Every one had a part. Betty herself spoke a piece that was as much as eight lines long. Little Totty trotted jauntily up to the platform, on which the judge would sit when court was in session, bobbed an irresistible bow, smiled cherubically — and then forgot every word she was to say and sidled back to her mother to hide her head and be comforted with a whole stick of red and white striped candy taken from the tree ahead of time. Naylor, with his ruddy face fairly glowing with peace on earth and good will to men, bellowed forth "Johnny Schmoker," with most comical representations of fife, drum, and doodlesack. The county clerk gave a speech, and Mrs. Elbridge made hers by inviting all the assembly to dinner the next day. Rob sang a solo, Rob and Rose a duet, and the four grown-ups in the deputy recorder's house gave a quartette in which the soprano was a little wobbly, the tenor decidedly weak and Jack Benson's lusty bass quite out of tune. But little Betty thought it the most beautiful music that mortal ever made. She could almost imagine that it came from the Christmas angels

her mother had told her about, floating above the tree.

In one way it was certainly like angels' music. It was altogether without instrumental accompaniment, "From necessity and choice," as Rob explained grandly. It was only when they went to take the gifts off from the tree that any lack was discovered.

"Where's Santa Claus?" asked Betty in a grieved tone. "Rose said that Santa Claus came and took the presents off from their tree. He ought to come here."

"Well, you see, Betty, the drifts are so bad and the snow is beginning to blow so that he could n't possibly get here," said her father, much dismayed at this omission of the desired arrangements.

At that moment on the great door below came a most unexpected sound to dwellers on a lonely prairie at night. It was a dull thud, again and again repeated. Was it knocking? Was it pounding? Was it falling?

"It's somebody at the door," said Jack Benson. "I'll go down and open it." But they all pressed into the hall and down the winding stairs. "Oh, no! Don't open it! It may be something terrible." His wife had not forgotten the Spirit Lake story. But little Betty, forgetting everything except her great desire, slipped through the space between the rest and darted to the door.

"It's Santa Claus!" she cried, tugging at the heavy thing which took all her childish strength to move. Over the threshold stumbled a man's figure, staggering with cold and weakness, wrapped in furs and covered with snow, the shaggy eyebrows and whiskers white with frost.

"Santa Claus did come! He did!" cried Betty, dancing up and down with delight. "Mr. Santa Claus, please, where is your sleigh?"

The man was Irish and quick-witted. He might be almost frozen and in desperate need, but he was not going to damp a child's delight.

"I'm not Misther Santa Claus, jist," he whispered huskily. "But Misther Santa Claus he sint me to tell you that on account of the badness of the weather, and the drifts being so hard to get through, he did n't dare try

to come here, because you see he had to go take prisints to all the other children in the world to-night, and he jist could n't risk bein' stuck. I got stuck. My team is out in a snowdrift, and I could n't get the horses out, and so I had to come here to get somebody to help me. And it's lost intirely I'd have been if it had n't been your light for a blissed guide; but I saw it and came to it. But Santa Claus he sint his love and said to tell you he wished he could have come, and he'd sint your prisints by tellygraft."

"Oh!" Betty was entirely satisfied. She watched with big, interested eyes while the settlers of Harmony brought snow and rubbed the man's frozen feet and hands, and spirits to revive him. But when they proposed leaving the court house to get him something to eat, she objected.

"Santa Claus would have gone up-stairs and taken the presents off from the tree and given them to us," she sobbed.

"I'll do it, sure!" answered the rescued traveler; and, putting aside all protest, he hobbled up the stairs on weary, aching feet that were scarcely able to drag themselves along the floor, and handed out the little gifts with many a quip and joke. Very small the gifts were, but it is doubtful whether any Christmas packages ever contained more of the precious commodity of good will. Everybody was pleased, and the sleepy Betty, with her mouth full of sticky molasses candy, voiced the opinion of the whole assembly.

"Don't — we — have — good — times?" she questioned drowsily, scarcely able to keep her eyes open while she spoke. "Are n't you glad — we comed — here — to live?"

"I'm glad," said the impromptu Santa Claus. "I'm glad," said her father and mother. "So am I," said Mrs. Elbridge and her husband, and Rose and Rob. "So am I," said Naylor, glancing at the pretty picture Rose made with sleeping Dillie cuddled against her shoulder, as he drew on his big fur overcoat and lighted his lantern preparatory to starting out on the Christmas relief expedition of the team in the drifts. The hardships of pioneer life were quite forgotten in its pleasures.

CHAPTER XI

A BLIZZARD

THE pleasant circle was broken one crisp, shining, January day, when the county clerk and his wife with little Totty stepped into the creaking bobsled and drove away for a stay of six weeks. Mrs. Elbridge was not very well, and it was thought that a change would restore her health. She had been so quiet that they had never dreamed how much they would miss her until after she was gone. They were so accustomed to leaning on the judgment and skill and experience of the kindly first settlers that they did not even realize that they leaned. For a while they felt as desolate and helpless as a family of children whose father and mother have gone away. Rose missed Mrs. Elbridge every hour. She was suddenly promoted to the position of leading and responsible woman in the little settlement, for pretty, frail Mrs. Benson was a dependent little lady who always looked to those about her for guidance.

In some ways Rose enjoyed this, for every one likes to be important; but in other ways it was really too hard for a fifteen-year old. She liked to have Naylor board with them. The helpful county treasurer always saved more trouble than he made. But she did not find it so easy to entertain every county official in his periodic visits to the county-seat, and every transient who chanced to pass through the settlement.

In the summer, the weekly number of such guests had often been more than a score, but in the winter they were comparatively few. There was hardly any travel except from necessity, for the weather was bitterly cold, and the roads unmarked in any way except by the sled-tracks of the previous traveler, which the next hour's wind was likely to obliterate.

How very cold it was! Day after day for weeks the thermometer registered below zero. The coating of frost on the windows grew thicker and thicker. The little unplastered house, in spite of the careful banking that

had been done to keep out the cold, seemed fairly to eat up heat. The great wood-pile at the door went down in an astonishingly short time.

"To-morrow, if it does n't storm, we must drive to Purlington Woods and bring back a load of wood," said Jack Benson one evening, as they sat over their supper of codfish gravy, and flapjacks.

His wife looked up with something bright suddenly appearing in her soft, dark eyes. A day without her Jack was a real disaster to the little woman.

"Oh, can't you take us? It would be such fun to all go on the bob-sled and ride back on the wood," she said.

Her husband smiled, for the dainty little lady was good to see, but he shook his head.

"Too uncertain, and even if it were pleasant you'd get too cold. Riding on a load of wood is n't like riding on a load of hay, and we can't trust this climate."

"I hope it won't be a good day at all," piped up little Betty, who had to take a part in every conversation. "I hope it will be just a nawful day so you will have to stay at home with us."

But it seemed the finest kind of a winter morning. The sun rose like a glowing ball of fire, without even one accompanying sundog to tell of cold. The white-covered prairie blushed from east to west with the most beautiful of rosy tints. The air felt warmer than it had felt for weeks. Water was actually dripping from the southern slope of the roof of the house and forming itself into long, glittering icicles, as Rob and Jack, in their heavy buffalo coats, brought around the great wood-sled.

"Rose," said Rob, as she hung around him, hating to have them go as much as Mrs. Benson, but resolute not to betray it by look or word, "Rose, do you know I'm afraid it is n't just right with Naylor. He's been having dizzy spells, and yesterday he pretty near tumbled over in the office. I'm afraid he is going to be sick."

Naylor sick? Rose felt a sudden sinking of heart, and yet she could hardly imagine anything wrong with Naylor. The sturdy, red-haired county treasurer had always seemed to her the embodiment of strength, their help and refuge in every difficulty since the first

day of life in Harmony, when he had helped them out of the slough. She turned back into the house with a troubled face.

The beautiful sunshine lasted only a few hours. Suddenly the sky became overcast. Before one had time to wonder whether the weather might be going to change, little Betty cried: "Why, Rose, it's snowing. But it can't snow very long, can it, Rose? Because all the snow in the sky must have snowed down."

"Not very long," answered Rose. "The Sky Woman probably has only a few flakes left."

But the feathery flakes changed to round pellets that hurtled down spitefully; and a rising wind set up a doleful moaning. The next time Rose glanced at the window, she could see nothing but driving whiteness.

"Oh, do you suppose it's going to be a blizzard, and our men will get caught out in it?" cried Mrs. Benson, in quick alarm.

"Oh, no," soothed Rose. "It can't be more than a little flurry. It came up too quick."

She spoke the more lightly because she was worried, too. She had heard too many

stories of pioneers being caught out in blizzards, and perishing of cold within a few rods of the homes they could not see, to be comfortable. "When Mr. Naylor comes at noon, I'll ask him whether there is any danger," she said. "That is, if it is n't cleared away by that time."

It did not clear away. It grew steadily worse.

"I'd better go and bring in some more wood. It won't do to be out of fuel in a storm," said Rose. But as soon as she had pushed the door open, she knew that this was a blizzard, not a flurry. The wind whistled so fiercely that a whole army approaching could hardly have been heard. The air was full of flying, icy bits that stung like needles. The barn, the Elbridge house, the court-house, even the wood-pile itself had vanished from sight. Before she had reached the corner of the house, she was compelled to struggle desperately. The wind caught her and whirled her around until all sense of direction was gone.

"I must go back," she thought. "I can't even tell which way the wood-pile is."

It was with difficulty that she could follow her own just-made tracks back to the house. She could not see it when she was within arm's length of it. She put out her hand and touched the wall, following it along to the door. As she reached it, it was opened and Mrs. Benson's troubled face thrust out anxiously.

"Rose, Rose, come back in." Her voice sounded faint and far away, though she was so close. "It's too bad to go out."

Thankfully she stumbled inside, quite breathless and worn out with the short struggle. What a haven of refuge the cold little house seemed! There was no use in trying to bring in more wood. It was well that the thoughtful master of the house had piled up in the dugout cellar which was entered from a trap-door inside, an emergency supply, not to be used except in times of need like this. But, oh, how was it with Rob and Jack out on the open prairie, if she could not go ten feet from the door without getting bewildered like this?

The thought tormented her all the while she was getting dinner. Her reassurance had quieted Mrs. Benson's fears, but it could not quiet her own. She rattled the dinner dishes very loudly to drown the sound of the storm, and wished with all her heart for Naylor to come, but no Naylor came. A half hour passed; a whole hour. At last they sat down to eat alone.

"Rose, why don't Mitter Naylor come to dinner? Do you suppose a blizzard has blowed him away?" queried Betty, with big anxious eyes.

"No, Betty; he has probably decided that he will finish up all the work of the day before he comes, and not have to go back in the storm."

But she did n't half believe it. It was not like Naylor to leave them alone at noon when the other men were gone. He would plow through any drifts to be sure that they were all right. Something must have gone wrong, or he would have come. She thought of what Rob had said. Suppose he should be sick all alone there! There was no one to help him, no one in all the settlement but themselves. She must see if it was all right. She went over to the nails where her wraps

hung and said in a tone that tried to sound careless:

"I'm going to the court-house to see why Mr. Naylor does n't come."

"Oh, Rose, don't think of it! It's a dreadful storm! Did n't you almost get lost when you went out for the wood?"

She had been nearer lost than she wanted her companion to know, but she answered bravely.

"I won't get lost now. I'll take the clothes-line and tie one end to this door, the way Rob and Jack did when they went to the barn in the blizzard, and then I can find my way back."

"But one clothes-line is n't long enough to reach to the court-house."

"I'll take Mrs. Elbridge's and ours and tie them together; and there is another long rope, too. There will be rope enough."

"But you can't find the court-house. You can't see a thing. You will get all turned around and won't know which way to go."

"I'll take father's little compass that he wore on his watchchain. I'll look at the needle and steer straight south and then I'll get there all right."

She was bundling herself up as she spoke, and getting down the clothes-lines which were fortunately both in one house. The little deputy recorder's wife did not realize how bad the storm was. She had never been out in a blizzard, — her Jack was too careful of her for that, — but she felt that it was not safe. She clung to Rose beseechingly, and the children reached up their soft little arms and added to the beseeching.

"Don't go, Rose. I'll be afraid the minute you are out of the house. I'll be afraid that something has happened to Jack and Rob. Naylor's all right — a big strong man like Naylor. He would n't want you to go."

But Rose put aside the clinging arms. "I'm going," she said.

She could scarcely open the door, for the wind was fearful. She tied one end of the rope around the knob and, with the coil around her arm, plunged forward through the snow. But even Rose, who had had one struggle that day with the storm, did not realize how hard a thing she was undertaking. In three steps she was out of sight of the house. The white, whirling snow-wall was

more deceptive than the darkest night. There one could, at least, feel familiar objects as one passed them, but now everything was covered up and unrecognizable by sight or touch. The wind snatched away her preath and blew her skirts about her till they bound her like fetters. The snow blinded her eyes till she could scarcely hold them open. Each drift seemed bigger than the last and harder to flounder through. Had she been dragging one weary limb after the other through waist-deep snow for hours? It seemed so. Her hands ached unbearably. Her feet were like frozen blocks of ice - that is if blocks of ice could be so full of pain. Again and again she fell and could not rise for a time, but she crawled forward on hands and knees. She struggled on until it seemed as if she must have gone miles. Then she stumbled against something and fell - oh, what was it that she had stumbled over?

Something heavy and soft. Something drifted over with snow but not a snowdrift. She brushed away the overspreading whiteness; and as she brushed there came to light a brown coat—a fur cap—a fringe of

bright hair — oh, it was Naylor lying in the snow!

She spoke to him and tried to rouse him, but he was quite unconscious. Then Rose saw something else in the snow, something terrible to see. It was a red stain that grew and spread, and the red was blood. He had cut himself; he was bleeding fast. As she bent closer to look, she saw that one arm was clumsily bandaged, but the bandage was altogether insufficient, and the blood was pouring from beneath it.

"Oh, he is bleeding to death! And if he does n't he will freeze to death! What can I do?"

What could she do, a slender girl in that terrible storm? If only her tall brother were there with his muscles of steel, or big Jack Benson! But they were miles away, perhaps lying in the snow too — freezing. Something must be done, and she was the only one to do it!

Unconsciously she strained her eyes through the whiteness of the storm to catch a glimpse of the tall, broad figure with the ruddy hair that had always come to help her in every time of need since the day when she first entered the settlement. But the ruddy-crowned head was lying low at her feet in the snow; the tall, strong figure was inert and helpless. Naylor, their help and dependence in every trouble, would die if he stayed there in the storm. It was useless to think of going back to the house for assistance. The frail little mother and the tiny children would be more helpless than she, and every second of time counted.

He must not lie there; it was certain death. Since she could not carry him, he must be dragged to shelter, and surely the nearest shelter was the court-house. But where was the court-house? It seemed as if she had been going toward it for hours, and yet there was no glimpse of it. Had she come the wrong way? No, she had followed the compass. She would follow it still.

She studied the dancing needle once more, then put it away and, bending over the unconscious figure, she grasped it and pulled with all her strength. Struggling, tugging, buffeted by the wind, beaten down by the stinging snow, tripped by drifts that seemed unsurmountable, she drew the prostrate figure inch by inch. A red trail of blood followed them on the snow. How long could he stand it? How long could she stand it? Not for another breath, it seemed. She staggered and fell. Unconsciously she put out one hand to steady herself. It touched the courthouse wall.

Inch by inch she felt her way along until she found the great door and propped it open. Then she stumbled back and, with the last bit of strength she possessed, she drew the bleeding figure inside.

The last bit of strength? No, she must have more! She sternly repressed the faintness that came over her; it was no time to faint now. The bleeding must be stopped before it was too late. Blessedly, she knew what to do for that. She had seen Rob suffer from just such a cut, in the far-away days at home and, as an anxious little sister, she had watched every detail of treatment.

She tore a wide strip from her shawl and wrapped it around the bleeding arm as tightly as she could. But she could not bind it tightly enough to stop the flow; she must

make a tourniquet. She ran hastily down the long hall for a stick. There were always plenty in the treasurer's kindling box. He kept it in beautiful order as he kept everything.

The floor of the hall was tracked with blood-drops. On the zinc beside the kindling box was the great jack-knife that Rob called Navlor's toad-stabber, with blood all over the blade. But she must not stop to think of how the cutting had been done now. She snatched up a bit of stick and ran back. She tore a new bandage and tied it on with a knot, thrusting through the knot the bit of stick. Then she twisted the stick till the red drops ceased to fall. The bleeding was stopped at last. Was he frozen? It was hard to tell, for the loss of blood made him so white. She ran for snow and rubbed the white face and nerveless hands. Then she warmed the remnant of her shawl at the fire in the office, which blazed up cheerily, all unconscious of its maker's peril, and covered him up while she kept on chafing the cold hands. The rubbing and the warmth brought back consciousness. A faint color came back into his lips. The eyes, looking very blue indeed against the background of the white face, opened. He smiled weakly at the girl.

"Rose," he said, "Rose." Then an anxious look swept over his face. "How did you get here? You should n't have come. The storm was awful. It was not safe for you, a girl like you."

How good it was to hear his voice again! Half the load of trouble slipped from her shoulders at the sound.

"I came to find you. You were out in the storm."

A long shudder went through the prostrate form, but the reassuring smile did not leave his face. He gripped his strength with a mighty effort and spoke again.

"Yes. I was out in the storm. I was trying to get to the house, but I fell. How did I get back here?"

"I dragged you in. I was afraid you would freeze to death."

"You?" The red came back for a moment and he pulled himself upright.

"I thought I was going to. Lots of men

have, as near their homes as this. I could have got through the drifts, but the bleeding made me dizzy. And it was a dizziness that made the hurt. I was cutting kindling; I fell with the knife in my hand and it cut me badly. I tried to bandage it up as soon as I could, but I could n't stop the bleeding and I knew it had to be stopped for I was growing faint. So I started to the house. But I could n't go. The storm was so bad and I kept getting dizzy again. And I fell; and I thought — I thought — that was the end."

Again the faintness seized him, but he would not give up. With every object whirling before him, he pulled himself totteringly to his feet. Then, placing his unwounded arm on Rose's shoulder, he dragged himself through the hall, that had never seemed so long, to his office. He sank into a chair with a groan that he could not suppress, and dropped his face on the table. It was terrible to see him so weak — Naylor, who had always been the embodiment of strength. But it was only the body that was weak. He looked at her in the middle of the weakness and pain with the old brave smile.

"I'll — I'll go to the house and get more bandages — and court-plaster — and something to give you — and ask Mrs. Benson what more to do," said Rose.

"No, no, don't. Don't think of it! I would n't have you do it for anything; you have done enough now. I thought I was finished. I knew Rob and Jack were gone. I never dreamed of your coming. You're the pluckiest girl - but I knew you were, always. But it was a dangerous thing for you to do, and I would n't have you do it again, not to save my life. Not that there's any question of that - now. I'm all right," - bravely ignoring the fact that he could hardly hold up his head. "The bleeding is stopped and the faintness is going. I'll rest a little while, and then I'll go home with you. We must go soon or Mrs. Benson will be frightened."

It was like him to think of a timid woman's fear rather than any pain or danger of his own. Rose protested; but there was no way to do anything more for his wound at the court-house. If he could get to the house, it was by far the best way.

"If he falls," she thought, "I can drag him. I have done it once."

There would be no fear of going out of the way this time, for the blessed rope would guide them. Even in her first terror, she had had presence of mind enough to fasten it to the court-house door-knob.

So a white-faced, determined man, very weak and trembling, and stifling a groan at every step, with one arm swathed in plaid woolen bandages and bound to his chest, and the other leaning as lightly as possible on the shoulder of a girl as white-faced and determined, staggered out into the storm and crept back, inch by inch, along the rope.

The wind fought against them, striving with every gust to knock them off their feet. The snow fought against them, dashing with cruel force on forehead and cheek, blinding their eyes, and rising all around in swirling drifts to engulf them. Weakness and exhaustion threatened them at every step. It was as brave a rescue in its way as that of a soldier carrying a wounded comrade out through the shot and shell of a battle, and the storm was more relentless and fierce than

any human enemy. But they conquered at last, and stumbled into the door of the little cabin, breathless, bloodstained, swathed from head to foot in snow like clinging grave-clothes — more like a couple of wandering ghosts than living beings. It is little wonder that timid little Mrs. Benson screamed when she saw them.

But she was efficient in cases of illness and a born nurse. She washed the wound and drew the edges together with a good deal of skill, fastening them with strips of the court-plaster that Rob always kept on hand — for Rob's ambition was to be a doctor and his delight was to gather material for all medical emergencies. She bandaged the wound tight with fresh white bandages and fastened the arm in a sling so that it could not be moved. Then she gave him some tea and hot milk, and he sank down on Rob's bed and slept like a baby in the sleep of utter exhaustion.

It was a blessed work for both her and Rose, for it kept their thoughts from Jack and Rob and the peril they were in. But, relieved of one anxiety, the second began to press with crushing weight. Where were the two men of the little household in this blinding, baffling storm? How would they get home? Would they get home at all? Rose was troubled about it, but kept her troubled thoughts concealed; but the more demonstrative young wife walked the floor and wrung her hands and moaned from the time that the early shadows began to fall.

"They ought to be home," she wailed. "They would certainly have turned back when the storm began, and they ought to be here now. They are caught in the blizzard, I know. They'll be frozen to death. They'll be lost and buried under the snow."

Rose did her best to comfort her, but her words were of no avail. Each moment the troubled and anxious young mother brought up some new cause for anxiety.

"They are buried under the snow-drifts," she sobbed. "And nobody will be able to find even their bodies till the snow melts in the spring. Oh, dear! Oh, dear!"

Then Betty cried because her mother cried, and baby Dillie joined in the tumult with the mightiest voice of all. The little home in the middle of the whirling whiteness had become the most dismal place in the world. Yet still the injured man slept; no noise could rouse him. It would have been a comfort to have talked it over with him; but they felt that this sleep was the very best thing for him and the only thing, perhaps, that would ward off a serious illness. Yet sometimes Rose felt as if she must wake him and talk to him, for the burden seemed too heavy to bear.

She did her best to cheer and comfort the little household, but the same terrible fear that was unnerving the little mother was tugging constantly at her own heart. She fed the children, and lighted the lamp, and tended the fire, and managed to restore at least an outward cheerfulness to everything but the mother's face. Just as the tall, wooden-cased clock on the shelf struck five, a great stamping was heard at the door.

"Oh, they 've come," cried Rose joyously; and the little woman on the farthest side of the room made one bound and flung the door open with her tears turned to smiles. But it was a cruel disappointment. It was not two snow-covered teamsters who stood there in the flaring lamplight — but — what? It

looked more like a moving snowdrift than anything else; but it was a snowdrift with horns and a switching tail. It was the cow—wild-eyed and trembling. She had broken out of her stall and come up to find all the companionship that could be found in that terrible storm.

"What shall I do with her?" said Rose. "I can't take her back. I can't find the way. She'll freeze to death if I leave her out there."

But the despairing wife did not answer. She was walking up and down again, moaning and wringing her hands. It was little Betty who gave the only suggestion.

"Bring the bossy in here," she said. "Poor bossy's cold. It's awful cold outdoors. Poor bossy'll freeze."

"I believe she would," said Rose. "I've a great mind to do it."

She opened the door wide, and the snowy bossy walked in as naturally as if it were her stable. Betty brushed the snow off with loving, soft, little hands. Dillie crowed and babbled at the sight, and talked in broken baby words.

"Cow-cow! Baby wants cow-cow!" she coaxed again and again.

"So she shall have cow-cow, nice and warm," said Rose, for it was one of Dillie's funny ways always to designate milk by that name. "I'll milk her right now and give baby some."

With Betty's delighted help she fed the cow a basin of yellow corn-meal and then sat down to milk. It was not a complete success, for Rose was inexperienced and not sure which side she ought to sit on, but she got enough for a warm drink for them all and some to put away. The children drank it down eagerly and, in spite of her anxiety, she also found it refreshing. She tried to get the sorrowing little mother to take some, too, but that effort was not a success.

"Oh, how can you?" she cried. "How can you even think of eating or drinking when Jack and Rob are probably lying starving, freezing to death. Oh, dear! oh, dear! If you cared you could n't eat."

All the hard-earned cheeriness was gone in a moment. Betty and the baby, quick to feel the change of atmosphere, raised their voices anew in wailing. Rose did care,—it may be more than the little woman who gave way so completely,—but she did not dare to show it. One wrung her hands. It may be that the other's heart was the more wrung that she made no motion. But it was a blessing to the children that she could keep the tears and lamentings back. She soothed them and sang to them and told them stories. She did everything she could think of to amuse them and kept them awake till they dropped to sleep from sheer weariness. Then there was nothing to do but listen and think.

"Three days! A blizzard lasts three days!" Mrs. Benson was moaning. "We shall be shut up here three days and know nothing. And Naylor's sick, and there's no one to find out. Oh, we shall not find out for weeks! We shall go on expecting them and expecting them, and we won't even find out till the snow melts in the spring. Oh, oh, oh!"

It was hard to stay there warm and safe and do nothing! Visions of Rob lying prostrate in the snow, as she had already seen one man lie, overwhelmed Rose's soul. There would be no one to drag him to shelter. Her feet ached to go to him; her arms ached to stretch out to him. She would have given her life for him gladly — and she could do nothing. Visions of him lying under the drifts — for months — of a finding in the spring — of a strange belated funeral — came before her so vividly that it seemed as if she saw them with her very eyes. Why had they come to this dreadful, cold, stormy, snow-cursed country? Why had she not begged him to stay at home?

The clock on the shelf struck eight. She counted the strokes dully. Only eight o'clock! It seemed to her that she had been straining her ears for years for a sound and had heard none but the rattle and moaning of the wind—like souls, lost souls going through the air. How was she ever to stand the hours that must pass by? She slipped in behind the calico curtain and knelt down beside her bed where Betty was sleeping.

"Papa!" murmured the child in her sleep. Was she calling upon some one who would never answer? Rose buried her face in the pillow and prayed in agony. A fresh gust of wind shook the little house till it quivered.

and wailed around the eaves like a mocking demon. Then it lulled, but faint and clear she heard another sound. It was the scratching of a dog on the door — then a bark. So Jack Benson's dog, which he had brought from the East when his family came, was wont to scratch when he wanted admission.

Then Rose's last thread of hope broke. That dog would never leave his master, she knew, if the master were alive. Rob and Jack were frozen to death, and the dog had come home — alone. She pulled the pillow close about her ears to escape the sound. She could not bear it.

"Why, Susan B, what is the matter?"

A hand was pulling the pillow away from her with dear boyish roughness. In her ears was a laugh — Rob's own laugh. The voice she had thought never to hear again was saying, teasingly:

"Why don't you get up and welcome the wanderers home, as Jack's wife is doing? Don't you care? We had a hard enough time to get here to be welcomed."

"Welcome! Oh, Rob! Oh, Rob!"
She could n't say another word, only cling

to him with all her strength turned into happy weakness. There was no need to be strong and brave any more. Rob would be strong and brave for her. On the other side of the curtain, the deputy recorder's wife was sobbing in her husband's arms.

"Oh, Rob! We thought — we were afraid — How did you get home in the blizzard?"

"Walked behind the sled. Let the horses pick their own way. We didn't know it, and they did. Was n't any use to try to drive them. We could n't see their ears, and didn't know east from west. But they knew — by instinct, Benson says. Couldn't ride. Sled got tipped over ever so many times in the drifts. Lost all our wood, and it was n't but half a load, anyway. But we held on, and the sled broke the track through the drifts for us whether it was right side up or not. I rather think that was what saved us and we should have frozen if we had n't walked. Pretty cold weather, Susan B."

"But Rob, where are the horses?"

"Why, in the barn, of course. Awful hard work getting in there, too! Barn full of snow! What would you expect us to do with them?"

"I'd expect you to come to the house to tell us you were safe first of all, and not stop to put up horses or anything. Mrs. Benson has been walking the floor and crying for hours because she thought you were frozen to death. And I thought so, too. Oh, Rob!"

Rob looked a little bothered. "We never thought of that," he said. And then, because boys don't like sentiment, he turned the conversation. "Awful full of snow that barn is! Could hardly get the horses in! And the drifts between it and the house — Whew! I don't know as we should ever have found it if the dog had n't barked for us! But we're here and we're hungry. Could you get a fellow something to eat, Susan B?"

CHAPTER XII

A STRUGGLE AND A VICTORY

OULD she? Her heart fairly danced with joy as she brought out griddle and frying-pan, sliced up the clammy, frozen chunk of salt pork and beat up the inevitable pancake batter.

Naylor had been examined with much solicitude, scarcely waking for the examination, and dropping off to sleep again before it was finished, and pronounced in the best condition in which it was possible to be after such an experience.

"Is it good for him to sleep so?" asked Rose, with an anxious quiver in her voice.

"Best thing on earth," answered Rob with the authority of the youthful, would-be medical student. "He's all right now. But he would n't have been all right if you had n't brought him in when you did. He would have been done for, sure. The cold would have finished him if the bleeding did n't. You're a brick, Rose. You've paid him back for everything he has done for us."

"All people who on earth do dwell
Sing to the Lord with cheerful voice;
Him serve with mirth; His praise forth-tell;
Come ye before Him and rejoice,"

sang Rose joyously, as she fried the pork and turned the pancakes.

"It is worth while being miserable to be so happy afterward," she said, with a surreptitious grasp on Rob's coat-tail, as she sat by his side, too happy to eat.

Rob was not too happy to eat. The strain had given the two young men a wondrous appetite, and a second batch of pancakes had to be beaten up before their hunger was satisfied. But Rose would have beaten up and baked with joy a dozen more batches.

The blizzard raged three days, but it was not terrible any more to the dwellers in the tiny settlement of Harmony. The little household, shut in by walls of whirling whiteness, felt that they were the happiest people on all the wide prairie. Rob and Jack were safe. Naylor was getting well fast. What

did it matter that the wind shrieked and howled, and the little house was so cold that the snow, which sifted in constantly, did not melt three feet away from the stove? What did it matter that the windows were drifted over till it was so dark that the lamp had to be kept burning till nine o'clock in the morning and lighted again at three o'clock in the afternoon?

They laughed when the wind whistled in their ears, and they had to shovel snow out of the house by basketfuls. They laughed when they shivered in their thickest wraps, and had great sport adding layers of bedclothes to their apparel. They laughed when Rob and Jack started out, muffled up in bright pink woolen bed blankets on top of their overcoats, to feel their way to the snowhidden barn, lead back the cow, and do what chores could be attended to in the storm. They laughed when they came wallowing back, as white as polar bears, with icicles hanging from eyebrows and noses. They laughed at everything that happened and everything that was said.

They laughed a great deal, though Rose,

as a loving sister, sorrowed, when Rob had an episode with frozen nails. Desiring to mend the stall from which the cow had broken out, he had repaired to the snowy barn with hammer and nails. But his hands were full, and the snow was not a good place on which to lay down his tools. Wishing to utilize every possible convenience, he thrust the nails into his mouth. Any one who ever touched a tongue to cold iron in zero weather can imagine the result. His lips and tongue stuck fast to them, and it was only by dint of most careful sisterly thawing with warm water that he was able to keep any skin at all on those useful members.

They laughed when Rose's solicitude gave Naylor, her patient, an involuntary showerbath. She was much troubled because the snow sifted in over his bed, day and night. At last, after trying one device after another in vain, she hit upon the expedient of pinning a sheet to the ceiling over his head by forks stuck into the timbers.

"There! That will catch all the snow and keep it off from him," she said with satisfaction. It did. It caught the snow until the sheet was so heavy that it sagged down in the middle. Then, when the house grew warm and the heat rose to the ceiling, the snow melted, and the sagging sheet was full of water.

"Oh, Rob, you must take it down before it drops through," said Rose. But how to get it down without spilling the water out was a problem. While they were attempting to solve it, one of the forks fell out, and the water poured down in a deluge squarely on Naylor's head. But it did not harm him, and he continued to recover so fast that Rob declared that he was going to adopt the cold water treatment in his practice as a regular thing.

When the blizzard cleared away, the whole out-of-doors was a delight. The heavens were so blue and bright that Betty asked: "Rose, do you s'pose that the snow was like washing powder and scoured the sky?" The earth was wonderful in its dazzling whiteness. The icicles that ran down from the eaves glittered like diamonds. The outlook from the top of the drifts was a wonderful view of

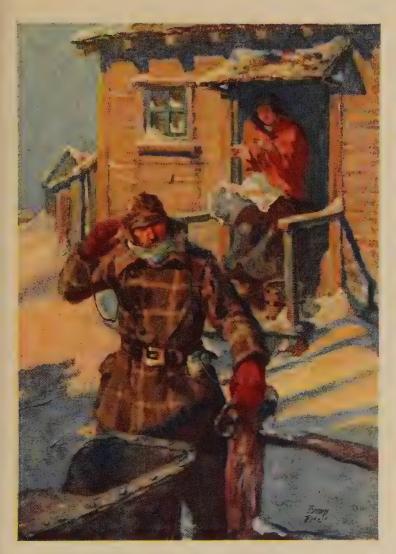
a white shining sea covered with ripples and billows, an ocean expanse turned to purest marble.

After this storm the weather moderated. The snow hardened, crusted over, and packed down until it was able to bear the weight of a team anywhere. Then the settlers were no longer shut in. Before them was spread a white shining road to everywhere. There was nothing to turn out for. Sloughs impassable in the summer were now as firm as rock, and they could drive to any point they could see, as straight as the wild ducks flew.

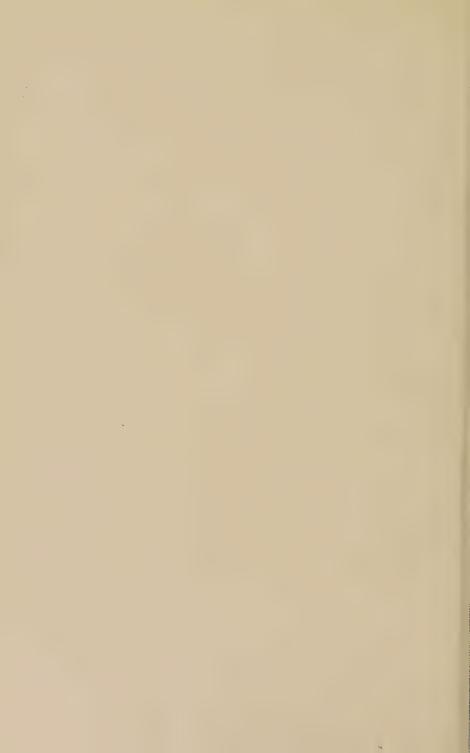
It was wise to improve this chance, for when the drifts began to melt and settle they would break through at every step, and all travel would be most difficult.

One day the postman, on his forty-mile route, brought a letter for Rose, written on pink paper and enclosed in a bright pink envelope. Her eyes grew eager and her cheeks flushed to match the rosy missive, as she read it.

"It's from Lydia," she said. "She is having such a good time this winter with everybody wanting to take her everywhere.



One day the postman, on his forty-mile route, brought a letter for Rose. Page 274.



She is going to the spelling-school at Shanley's Grove next week. Mr. Blakesley is going to take her in a cutter; she wants us to go, too."

"Would you like to go?" asked Naylor, thinking how quickly the sensitive face changed to express pleasure or pain.

"Oh, yes."

That settled the question. The entire population of Harmony forthwith began to plan to drive to the Shanleys' Grove spelling-school, stay all night with the Shanleys, and come back the next day. There was no fear that they might not be welcome. Hospitality was the rule of the prairie.

It was a great occasion. Spelling-schools were almost all that there were to go to in those days, and people gathered to them for miles around. No society function of the present time is more important, and this had special distinction, for it was to be held in the only schoolhouse in Adams County. There were other schools — a few — but they were taught in the settlers' houses by settlers' wives, who often had no pupils but their own children. But this school had more than twenty scholars, and was presided over by a

father, not a mother. A very tiny school-house it was, white like the snow that surrounded it, and crowded on such occasions to its utmost capacity.

After all, it was only Rose and Rob who started out from Harmony, looking, in the bottom of the big bob-sled, like two very small peas in a very big pod. The children had colds and it was thought not wise to take them out. Naylor, who wanted to go, was detained by some unexpected business in the treasurer's office. The two in the sled and the little group at the house waved goodby to each other, never dreaming how long it would be before they were together again.

How delightful it was to glide over the shining whiteness! What a joyous sound was the creaking of the runners on the snow! How bright the sharp air was! Rose snuggled down in the quilts and comforters, perfectly happy. Was there ever a lovelier sight than when the sun slipped down below the winter horizon, filling all the snow-covered earth with a wonderful red glow and sending long bright streamers, like rosy fingers, up to the very zenith in the tender blue of the evening

sky? Then the round full moon rose in the east, marvelous in silver splendor. From one side to the other Rose turned in rapture. She could not tell which was the most beautiful.

Before supper-time they reached the hospitable little house that was entertaining Lydia and her escort and was always ready to take in two or a dozen more. The girls fairly rushed into each other's arms. Lydia was now enjoying the full privileges of young ladyhood. These, in the pioneer days when young women were few, involved the accepting or refusing of a great deal of attention from would-be beaux.

One devoted swain had brought her in his cutter to the spelling-school. Another had all arrangements made to escort her to the next social occasion, and a third to the next. Half a dozen more were perpetually dancing attendance on her. She lived in an adjoining county more thickly populated than the one of which Harmony was the county-seat, and her talk was full of accounts of socials, quilting bees, corn huskings, grange meetings, and other lively diversions. At such times

the few young women present were accustomed to take supper, ice cream, or whatever refreshment was offered, with one young man after another in turn. Lydia had often eaten half a dozen times.

"The only thing you must remember," she said, "is which fellow you went with, so that you won't make a mistake and let the wrong one take you home. They get mad about that."

Stout and hearty and jolly, overflowing with good health and good humor, Lydia was enjoying life to the full. Shy Rose looked upon her in wonder; but she was very genuinely and unselfishly interested in her friend's experiences, and the two girls talked until Rob declared that their tongues would certainly be worn into strings.

Supper was rather disturbed by the fretfulness of the small boy who sat by their hostess's side.

"My head aches," he whined. "I don't want any supper." But they had very little time to attend to him. They hurried through the dishes and into their wraps and started out to the spelling-school gayly.

The spelling-school was very successful, but its triumphs were forgotten in the memorable events that followed. For a subtle enemy was already lurking among them, an enemy more to be dreaded than the savage Indians.

The spelling, which had been lively and exciting, began to flag before it was time for closing. The pupils of the school showed a strange dumpishness and a disposition to gather around the stove and shiver.

"My froat's sore," cried little Mamie Williams, tugging at the skirts of the head speller to draw her out of line. "Mamma, my froat's awful sore and I want to go home."

The pronouncing of the words ceased, while Mamie and her flock of brothers and sisters were bundled up and an exit effected.

"One of the other children was complaining of sore throat this afternoon. I hope it is nothing catching," said the teacher, with an anxious glance at his own little sons and daughters. At that moment the attention was directed to little Jeddie Jenkins. He was shivering with a chill and crying pitifully. His ten-year-old sister, who had brought him to the spelling-school, could do nothing to soothe him. Lucy Smith burst out crying, too.

"Ma, I'm so hot. My throat hurts and my head hurts, too."

Some one who had had experience gave a look at Lucy's red face, and then drew her into a corner and turned down the little gown. Her throat and arms were covered with little fiery red points. There was a hurried consultation; and a whisper ran from one group to another.

Scarlet fever! It was one of the scourges of that time. In more than one pioneer community it had swept through family after family and left it almost childless. A woman whose sister had buried four children with it the year before clasped her baby convulsively and cried out in fear. After that there was no more spelling. Family after family were hastily gathered together and hurried away.

Lydia was one of the first to hear the news.

"Rose, have you had scarlet fever?" she whispered.

"No; have you?"

"No, and I don't want it. My two cousins had it when they were just about as old as I; and one of them died and the other was left deaf as a post. I'm going to start home right away. It's bright moonlight and Mr. Blakesley would just as soon take me as not. You'd better call Rob and drive home, too."

"Oh, but if it is scarlet fever we are all exposed to it."

"Yes, but we may not have it if we get away in time."

"But if I went home, I might carry it to Dillie and Betty. I could n't do that."

"Rose," said Lydia, "come home with me. I always wanted you to make me a visit. Mr. Blakesley can take us both in the cutter. Come on!"

"I'll see what Rob says," said Rose.

Rob was helping in the group around Jeddie Jenkins. The little fellow had quite collapsed, and would have to be carried home. He turned at Rose's words, and his eyes were earnest and his voice steady as Rob's always were in time of danger.

"I'm sure that it is scarlet fever," he said.

"It looks like an epidemic breaking out in ever so many families at once."

"Oh, Rob! What will they do?"

"Fight it out and do the best they can. I'll have to stay and help them. There is n't a doctor for sixty miles. Everything I know will be needed. You'd better go home with Lydia. It's the best thing I can think of for you to do."

He held her cloak for her and gathered up her wrappings with unusual carefulness. He would have kissed her good-by if no one had been there to see. It was a serious thing that brought a demonstration of affection from Rob. Rose turned away but she was not satisfied. Get into a smart cutter and ride off on a visit of pleasure while Rob was working amid such danger as this? She could n't do that.

"No, I'm not going with you," she said to Lydia. Lydia protested, but gentle Rose, when her mind was firmly made up, was the more inflexible of the two. Their hostess of the evening, thoroughly alarmed now about her own small boy's indisposition, had taken it for granted that Rose would go with Lydia

at her urgent request, bade them a hasty good-by, troubled and kind, and departed. Rob had gone to help carry Jeddie Jenkins home.

The schoolhouse had emptied itself with surprising rapidity. There was scarcely any one left but a young mother who stood out on the stoop waiting for her husband to drive around for her. She had a baby in her arms, wrapped up in a patchwork quilt that was so clumsy and big that it made a bundle twice the size of the child. The mother held the little one with shaking arms. Even in the moonlight Rose could see that her face was unduly flushed.

"I feel so dizzy that I can hardly stand," she confided. "I've been feeling bad for two or three days, but I thought it would do me good to get out. But it has n't. I wish I had stayed at home. If there's scarlet fever around, I am afraid I'm coming down with it."

Her husband's face was troubled as he lifted her up into the high seat. He started his horses as quickly as possible, anxious to get home. Rose, looking after them with apprehension, forgot herself for a few moments, and when she turned again, the school-house was empty. She ran down the white road to see whether Rob were not coming back.

Something had dropped out of the farmer's sled which was disappearing over a hill. It was something little and white, so white that it scarcely made a showing against the white snow.

"Come back! Come back! You've lost something!" called Rose. But the creaking of the runners drowned the sound of her voice.

"I 'll go and see what it is," she said to herself. "It might be something they would not like to lose."

She ran on down the road and as she ran there came to her ears, faint and pitiful at first, then louder and more energetic, the sound of a baby's cry.

"Where can a baby be?" thought astonished Rose. "Oh," as she neared the dropped bundle, "it is the baby they have lost. It must have dropped out of the quilt."

It was the baby. It had slipped out of the

clumsy enveloping wrapping to the snowy road without a sound; and the mother, holding the great bundle still in her lap, did not dream that it had lost its precious center. The baby had been too much surprised, perhaps, to cry at first, but it was screaming now. Rose picked it up and ran with all her might after the vanished sleigh. But it had gone entirely out of sight. The bright, white air was nipping cold. The going was hard, for the track was broken only for horses. Rose's running turned to walking and then stopped. It was evidently useless effort, and the baby, wrapped only in a thin little white cloak, was in danger of being chilled.

"They will miss it in a little while and come back for it," thought Rose. "I'd better take it back into the schoolhouse where it is warm, and wait for them."

She turned back with a sudden, thankful realization of the overseeing presence of Providence. What if she had gone with Lydia, or Rob, or Mrs. Shanley! Then there would have been no one to see and pick up the child.

The loud crying was fast changing to

sleepy sobs. The baby was more frightened than hurt. The snow where it had fallen had been soft, and it had not lain long enough to get cold. It was snuggling quite contentedly in Rose's arms by the time she reached the schoolhouse again.

The schoolhouse was shut but not locked. The teacher, anxious to get his children home, had delegated the closing to some one else who, after the manner of substitutes, had but half performed his task. The fire was flickering warm and bright from the opened door of the big stove. The warm darkness, full of rosy light, was most delightful. Rose drew the teacher's big chair close to the stove and sat down with the baby in her lap. She untied the little hood and loosened the little white cloak. Then she rocked the child back and forth in her arms, crooning a sleepy little song. The pretty little eyelids closed — opened — closed. The baby was fast asleep.

It had been a wearying run for Rose, and the long ride in the cold had helped to make her sleepy. Her own dark lashes sank lower and lower on her round young cheek. The fire danced and died down. The moon wheeled over to the west. The frost snapped and cracked. But Rose was not lonely or troubled all alone, for she was fast asleep.

She slept till the door was flung open and the young father and mother plunged in, wild with anxiety.

"Is my baby here?" cried the woman. "Oh, thank God! Thank God!"

She snatched the child from Rose's lap before the girl was fairly awake and began feeling it all over to see that it was not hurt.

"We never missed it till we got home," explained the man in a shaking voice. "We thought of course it was in the quilt. When we found out, she was half crazy, and so was I, too. We were so afraid it was frozen. We were so afraid it was hurt—"

The mother was hugging her baby as if she would never let it go. But even in her joy she swayed and almost fell. The illness which she had forgotten in her anxiety for her child was mastering her.

"I'm sick," she said piteously to Rose. "You'll come home with us, won't you, and

hold the baby. I'm afraid I'll drop it again; and he'll have to drive."

She reached the baby back to Rose and held out her arms to her husband.

"Take us home," she said. "Take us home as fast as you can go. I — I'm afraid I can't sit up much longer."

Her husband fairly had to lift her into the sleigh and hold her up all the way home. Rose carried the baby, once more wrapped in the quilt which they had brought back, and every few minutes she felt inside of it to make sure that the child was still there. So they rode through the white moonlight; and by the time they had reached the farmhouse the mother was very ill. It was well for them that Rose had come. To attend to the needs of the sick woman and the baby, make up the fires, and get the house comfortable and safe to stay in was more than one pair of hands could do.

All the rest of the night they worked over the sick woman; and Rose had to do the directing, for the husband, though willing and anxious as could be, had no idea what to do for sickness. It was then that Rose was glad of her experience with Mrs. Benson's dreadful sick headaches. This illness was far more serious, but the hot cloths and hot water that helped Mrs. Benson seemed to relieve the pain here, also. But it was only a measure of relief that they could bring. By morning the patient was in a raving fever. And there was no doctor in the county.

"Oh," cried Rose, "if only Rob were here. He has studied doctor books. He would know something more for us to do."

The man snatched at this thread of hope instantly. "I'll go and get him," he said. But then he stopped; "that is, if you will stay here. I suppose I ought to take you back, but we can't both go and leave her. It's a good deal to ask but —"

"I'll stay as long as you need help," said Rose; and the man turned to make for the third time that night the long trip to town.

Rob came on horseback, getting there ahead of the sled and its wearied horses. He looked white and tired. He had ridden in the cold all the way to Harmony to get his medical books and medicines for which there was so sudden a demand. He was spent with

fatigue, but his bearing was confident and his voice reassuring. Not a complaint did he make over his own all-night efforts. As some one said long afterward:

"Rob Kellogg would rather get up in the middle of the night in the worst storm in the year and tramp five miles to help somebody who was sick than pick up a thousand dollars." But he looked dismayed when he saw Rose:

"Rose, what are you doing here? I thought you went home with Lydia. I told you to."

His voice was stern as only an older brother's can be.

"Oh, Rob, I had to stay if you did; and I can help, too. They need me, Rob. They could n't have got along without me last night. I shall stay and help if you do."

There was no time to say more. Rob must look at the sick woman and do what he could for her in the shortest possible time and then ride back with speed, for there was scarcely a house in the neighborhood that was not calling for him. His little medical knowledge was worth everything just then, for it was all they had to help them.

It was a hard and anxious time in the little settlement so suddenly stricken. The epidemic had come down upon them like lightning out of a clear sky. It was figured out afterward that the first exposure had come at the Christmas celebration which had also been held at the schoolhouse. It had come through a child who had the disease so lightly that no one dreamed, until the rest came down with it, that it was anything more than a severe cold. But this light case had infected others in virulent form, and it had broken out in a dozen families at once.

The nearest doctor was sent for as soon as possible; but it took four days to get word to him and bring him to the Grove; and when he came, he could only stay to make the rounds once, for many more patients were waiting for him. He put his hand on Rob's shoulder in the heartiest approval and commendation.

"This young fellow is doing all right," he said. "You are fortunate to have him here. I'll leave him my directions and more medicines; and if you do what he says, you will come out all right."

So it came about that nineteen-year-old Rob, with scant knowledge, but very great enthusiasm and kindness of heart, fought the scarlet fever epidemic at Shanley's Grove and conquered it. It was not as if he had been a regular doctor. Whatever he did was done in simple neighborliness with no thought of compensation or reward. No one would have dreamed of asking a regular doctor to do one half of the things that Rob took in hand, simply because they ought to be done and there was no one else to do them. He prepared fomentations and compresses and applied them. He administered baths. He blew sulphur into sore throats. He told stories to sweeten bitter doses of medicine. He lifted and turned aching little bodies. He spread wrinkled sheets and covers smooth. He invented amusements to keep discontented little patients happy in bed. He sat up with the sick night after night till it was a wonder when he got any rest at all. He took charge of affairs by day, that wearied caretakers might snatch a few hours of sleep. He did a dozen things at once, as only a mother or a boy who puts his whole heart

into a work can do. Only a boy's fresh strength could have stood the strain. Only a boy who was enlisted heart and soul in the grim fight with disease would have stood it. No father or mother in all the settlement did more for the children of Shanley's Grove during the scarlet fever epidemic than Robert Kellogg.

Meantime, on the Albrecht farm, his sister was making herself no less useful in a smaller sphere. The young farmer's wife was very ill. The exposure to the cold, with the fever already upon her, and the shock and fright had worked most disastrous results. For days it seemed as if she could not recover. There was no hired help to be had for love or money. Rose and the husband together tended the sick woman, the baby, and the house, and found it almost more than both of them could do. When the mother was just beginning to get better, the baby was taken with the fever. It was well that he had it lightly and that by this time he was used to Rose's ministrations and obeyed her and loved her in baby fashion, or they could not have gone through with it successfully. When

it was over, the recovering invalid herself was scarcely thinner and whiter than Rose, so severe had been the strain. But the light of victory was in her eyes and in Robert's; and neither of them took the fever. Afterward they found out that they had both had it in the far-off, unremembered days of infancy.

"So we were not heroic after all to stay and help," said Rose with a little sigh, as she put the letter back into the envelope.

"You were just as heroic as anybody could possibly be," answered the farmer's wife from the wooden rocking-chair covered with a comforter, where she sat and happily held her baby in her weak arms. "I am sure I should have died if you had not come out to help take care of me, and the baby, too. And the Shanleys think that Rob's doctoring saved Peter's life; and the Jenkinses are sure that their second little girl would have died as well as Jeddie if it had n't been for him."

Indeed, the epidemic — by reason, as the settlers of Shanley's Grove firmly believed, of Rob's doctoring — had not been so fatal as it had been in other settlements. Only one had died, and that was the small Jenkins

boy who had been stricken down in the spelling-school. Rob had worked like a tiger to save him; but the case was an instance of the dreaded "suppressed fever" and hopeless from the beginning.

It was a sad case, for the house was full of little children; the father had been crippled by having his hands and feet frozen in a blizzard; and the mother was not well and burdened with the care of a tiny baby. The neighbors were kind, but they could not help much, for all had sickness in their own families.

With his own hands, Rob prepared the little body for burial. There was no place to keep the dead child in the one-roomed home during the short time while the Shanley Grove carpenter was cutting and planing the best boards he could find and shaping them into a little coffin. Even the bed upon which the boy had died was now occupied by another sick child.

A litter of boards was hastily nailed together and covered with a sheet, and Rob and the limping father laid the little body upon it and carried it through the snow to the schoolhouse. There Rob watched beside the dead all night, while the wild winds beat like demons on door and walls, and the black, awesome dark stared in at the curtainless windows.

But the bravest thing Robert Kellogg did was not watching with the dead or caring for the sick. It was something that was infinitely harder to the silent, undemonstrative boy. It was when they stood, a tiny group of men, at the lonely little grave, already half filled with snow, and the small rough coffin was lowered in. For there was no minister in the county, as there was no doctor. There was no one to say a word of faith or hope at that pitiful first burial.

"Can't you pray?" asked the stricken father of one after another. "It will make his mother feel so bad to have him buried so."

But one after another shook his head. Then Rob stepped forward to the edge of the desolate little grave. He bared his head to the falling snow, and prayed aloud — Rob, who would rather have been killed than say one word of religious experience — the youngest

man there, and the shyest. A halting prayer — but there are those who will remember it of him always.

Then he went back with feet that reeled with weariness to work over the rest of the Jenkins children till they were out of danger.

It was over at last. The sick children were recovered, and most of them were through the peeling stage. Mrs. Albrecht was up and around, and the houses had received their scarlet fever cleaning and fumigation with burning sulphur. The disinfection would have seemed a very inadequate affair in these modern days, but, for that time, it was very thorough indeed. Rob, with his new authority as medical practitioner, had seen to that.

It had been the middle of January when Rose and Rob had stepped into the bob-sled and started off for their visit of a day and a night, which had lengthened itself into more than six weeks. It was March now. The drifts were beginning to melt and sink down. The going was bad, for the horses broke through every few steps, and it would be worse soon.

"We must go back while we can," said Rob.

"Oh, don't go. Stay here and take a rest after your hard work," begged his grateful hosts. But it seemed to Rob and Rose that there was no place to rest but home.

"On Monday," said Rob, as he seated himself in the wooden chair beside the stove, refusing the one rocker that Mrs. Albrecht had risen from, with her baby in her arms, to offer him. "On Monday Mr. Shanley has agreed to take us home. I saw Boulter getting supplies yesterday, and he said he was going to the court-house and would tell the folks. You will be glad to get home again, won't you, Susan B?"

"Glad? Oh, yes!" Rose's eyes were shining, but the quick tears had come to Mrs. Albrecht's.

"I can't bear to have you go," she said. "Must you, so soon as Monday?"

"Yes. I have sent word."

But the Harmony people did not wait till Monday. The minute word was received, they sent after their wanderers. It was Friday morning that the word was sent. On

Friday afternoon Rose, looking out of the tiny paned window, saw a bob-sled coming across the prairie.

There was something familiar about that bob-sled and the horses that drew it. There was something familiar about the driver, too. There was something delightfully familiar about the shock of bright red hair that curled up under the edges of the fur cap. Rose watched anxiously until she was sure that the bob-sled was going to turn up past the farmhouse. Then she ran down the trodden path, forgetting in her eagerness to put on even a scarf, though the March wind was cold.

"Oh, Mr. Naylor! Oh, please, Mr. Naylor. Wait! Wait! I'm here — Rose Kellogg. I want to speak to you."

Did n't he know she was there? For what other reason had he taken the long, cold drive from Harmony, leaving his work when it was most pressing? The bob-sled was driven up to her in instant obedience; but Rose went on, her words fairly tumbling over each other in her haste for fear he should get away before they were said.

"Don't drive on until you have told me about the people at home. Can't you come in for a little while?"

"Well, yes. Perhaps."

The blue eyes under the bright hair were twinkling. He had not had the slightest idea of going farther.

"You go in where it's warm. You'll catch cold without any wraps. I think I can come in a little while as soon as I have hitched the team." There was no need of mentioning how very willing he was to go in.

"I came to take you and Rob home tonight," he said, as he entered the door.

"To-night? Why, Mr. Shanley is going to take us home Monday."

"That's too'long to wait. Mrs. Elbridge and Mrs. Benson sent me to tell you they could n't get along without you another day. Pack your things and come right along. They sent me as soon as they got the word from Boulter."

He had been more than willing to come; but there was no necessity for mentioning that—just then. Life without Rose at the settlement had been life with much of the brightness and sparkle gone out of it. Even the return of Mr. and Mrs. Elbridge and Totty from their long visit had not filled the vacancy.

So they went home three days before they were expected to go. It was a long drive, for the roads were bad, but Rose enjoyed every minute of it. Harmony looked very small as they drove up to it in the moonlight, but the light that streamed from the little windows was red and bright, and the welcoming faces that poured out of the doors to meet them very dear and happy. Totty danced up and down like a perpetually jumping jack-in-the-box. Dillie came toddling out to meet them with her queer baby gait - walking on the broad-guage as her father said - and offered her dear little mouth for kisses again and again. Betty, with a world of affection in her questioning eyes, attempted to cling to Rose's skirts and Rob's coat-tails at the same time, and could hardly be persuaded to let go of either of them.

"Oh, Rose! It was so lonesome without you."

Little Mrs. Benson fairly sobbed as she

clasped the girl. "I thought ever so many times that I would rather have the children have the scarlet fever than have you away," she said.

In the county clerk's home the table was spread with the very finest table-cloth, and fairly loaded with all the dainties that could be procured in the little settlement. Silent Mrs. Elbridge had expressed her affection for the returned wanderers by cooking, and there was no cook to beat her in all the world. It was long past supper-time; but not even the children would take a bite till Rose and Robert came. They were received and ushered in as the most honored of guests.

It was a merry meal. They ate with the appetites which the good cooking, the cold drive, and the long waiting time had induced; and when every one had eaten all he possibly could, there was no move to leave the table. It seemed too good to be together again to break up the circle, even by putting the children to bed. Everything that had happened in both settlements since the afternoon when Rose and Robert drove away to the spelling-school had to be told and discussed; and

then everything that had happened since the day when Rose and Robert first drove into Harmony in their mover's wagon had to be remembered and gone over. When they had talked so long that there was once more space to put it in, more coffee was brought. The earliest pioneer of Harmony rose with his steaming cup in his hand.

"Let us have a toast," he said, in his slightly hesitating way. "Let us drink a toast to our youngest settlers. To the boy whose hand has helped wherever it has been, and to the girl who has grown"—Mr. Elbridge's keen blue eyes twinkled. The slender figure in the pretty new gown, with modestly lengthened skirts, that had cost Rose so much tribulation to make, was very much taller than the little Rose who had come to the settlement—"to the girl who has grown to be more of a blessing every day she has been here!"

"Oh," cried Rose, with the pretty color flashing all over her face. "Have I been like that? I tried to be. I tried to help. I think I did help at the Albrechts' where there was no one else. But here! I knew so little and

I blundered so much! I thought I was pretty much of a failure."

"A failure!" There was a perfect buzz of protesting tongues around the table.

"If anybody ever dares to say that you are a failure in anything, just send him to me and I'll settle him," said Rob, with unaccustomed fervor of brotherly indignation.

"Oh, Rob! Biscuit! And dried apple sauce! And bread! And sewing! And burning up coffee! And losing the baby! And letting the clothes blow away!"

"And killing rattlesnakes! And learning to ride horseback when you were afraid! And fighting off prairie fires like a man! And catching the horse-thief, as not a man of us could! And learning to be 'most as good a cook as Mrs. Elbridge! And nursing scarlet fever cases and curing them! And saving the Albrecht baby's life!"

"And rescuing foolish folks who cut themselves and go out to throw away their lives in blizzards!" Naylor's voice was light when he began, but it grew very earnest, and little waves of red pulsed up to the very roots of his bright hair.

"You're not a failure so far as saving lives is concerned. I think if you had n't come to Harmony, Adams County would have to be breaking in a new treasurer."

"Rose makes the nicest paper dolls in the world," said Betty fervently, anxious to add her mite.

"Wose tan 'muse us best of anybody," said Totty graciously; and little Dillie stretched out her chubby arms and toddled over from her mother's lap to hug Rose's feet.

There was approving clamor on every side; but the hesitant voice of the earliest settler rose at last above them all. He spoke less often, and perhaps that was the reason why they listened to him best.

"You have done something for every one of us," he said. "You have given sweetness and helpfulness and courage wherever you went."

He lifted the coffee-cup high and turned to the assembled faces that smiled back assent and applause.

"A toast to the sweetest flower on the prairie. Long may she blossom here—our Prairie Rose."



